

Willi Goetschel

Derrida and Spinoza: Rethinking the Theological-Political Problem

Derrida's reading of Spinoza cannot be addressed without attending to the particular form of present absence that discussions concerning Spinoza have assumed over the course of time, and which continue to proliferate at the current juncture. As the debate concerning Spinoza has come to assume the stature of a theological-political complex of its own, exploring Spinoza requires a critical reflection on the deeper role of the theological-political problem as it informs the very act of reading, along with Spinoza's own thought. With Spinoza, the theological-political investments and ramifications of reading have come to the fore as deep problems of philosophy itself. Exploring the interface between Spinoza and Derrida thus poses the question of reading and its nexus with the theological-political problem as one of a profound affinity between the two thinkers, moreover one that requires attention as their very point of connection.

If, however, the hermeneutic circle seems unavoidable, its circularity may yet present its most enabling feature, reminding us that hermeneutics has a history that needs to be critically worked through if its methodological regime no longer commands the universal appeal it once could call its own. Derrida's pointedly post-hermeneutic project of reading reconnects with a Spinoza that the school of Hermeneutics has so carefully marginalized.

Any critical move of reading and rereading Spinoza remains, as a consequence, marked by the theological-political implications that inform the hermeneutic situation, which in turn continues to define the level playing field of contemporary philosophic discourse. As a consequence, the constellation between Derrida and Spinoza can only be comprehended in its philosophic import if this fact is given due critical consideration. Proper attention to it makes the relationship between Derrida and Spinoza legible as a constellation of critical consequence.

Reading this constellation and deciphering its import for both Spinoza and Derrida presents a challenge critical discourse has yet to confront. Still, some critics claim that Spinoza does not figure in Derrida's thought

with philosophically significant relevance. There are of course explanations for such claims, explanations based on how these views are created, framed, and maintained institutionally and disciplinarily such that the theological-political dimension of the issue has come to be marginalized or completely ignored, or has on the other hand – and I leave it open as to what remains more problematic – become radicalized. This radicalization persists to such a degree that the currently dominant approach of dealing with secularization and the theological-political problem has experienced a revival of the Schmittian fashion of claiming the theological in a manner that – in a curious twist – re-theologizes what it claims to secularize. Indeed, Schmitt’s radically reductionist thinking has gained such currency that it has effectively effaced the critical thrust of Spinoza’s distinctions. Ironically, even Schmitt’s opponents have allowed themselves to come under the spell of the blunt decisionism of his distinctions.

Notice that the distinction between theology and religiosity, so decisive in Spinoza, has no purchase in Carl Schmitt who reduces religiosity to theology if he acknowledges it at all. Compare Schmitt’s approach with Georg Simmel’s critical move that precedes much of Schmitt’s work: to attend to the profound significance of religiosity in modern society in pointed contrast to the theological. But then, Spinoza looms interestingly large in Simmel’s thought.

In other words, in the attempt at addressing the theological-political complex, the problematic this complex represents gets ironically reiterated with relentless resilience. Despite all efforts at neutralizing the theological-political – or precisely because of these efforts – this resilience exerts more resistance, the more the urge for its neutralization increases. Part of the problem is of course one we could call, for lack of a better word, the issue of Spinoza’s Jewish identity, or his Jewishness. There is a peculiar dialectic at play here that reminds one of the dynamic Heine’s approach to the same question suggests. Heinrich Heine is the first modern intellectual to have articulated this aspect of the problem of Jewish identity head-on and in unequivocal terms: whether Spinoza is considered Jewish or not, makes pretty much the same difference when it comes to the formidable wall of rejection facing his philosophy, with regard to its significance for rethinking the theological-political problem. Read as a “Jew” or, on the other hand, as a universalist, the very concern of his theological-political argument remains in both cases curiously marginalized if not entirely repressed, at least as far as its specific philosophical importance is concerned. This incapacity, disin-

terest, or unwillingness of philosophical currents to critically reflect on this issue with regard to Spinoza's own approach to the problem has of course further causes that deserve examination. But for the purpose of the argument I pursue here it is sufficient to simply acknowledge the intricate play between "reception" and "non-reception" – or to be more precise – between the manifest and latent trajectories of Spinoza reception and appropriation that continue to define the way he is viewed today. As we know, any kind of suppression or repression leads to a return of the repressed that ultimately may be more momentous than any other form of institutionalized reception. As a result, we can speak of the strangely absent presence of Spinoza. The aspect of latency, or absent presence is what makes the trajectory of Spinoza reception so particularly striking as a paradigm for creative exchange. And even where he is 'present,' his view of the theological-political has remained subject to a curious degree of disinterest, studied or not.

This is not an unusual situation for Derrida but one that resonates with his own project. It is therefore crucial to pay attention to the particular way in which Derrida addresses the thought of Spinoza. The specific contexts and the fashion in which he introduces Spinoza play a decisive role in this critical intervention into a discourse, an intervention that is circumspect not to mute or instrumentalize Spinoza, not to "assimilate" and "integrate" his thought to the parameters of the dominant institutional discourse of philosophy. Derrida's intervention with regard to Spinoza can only be fully appreciated if we attend to the particular discourse that surrounds and informs the dominant attitudes towards the latter. As it is usually the case with Derrida, it would be unfortunately reductive to see the manner in which he goes about the business of addressing the subject simply as a gimmick or *façon de parler*, an expression Derrida would immediately question. While his engagement with Spinoza may occasionally appear as elusively situated on the margins of his interest, the playfully allusive way in which Derrida addresses Spinoza suggests more than just compliance with, or repetition of, the trademark approach his readers might have become accustomed to expecting. Attending to the particularity of Derrida's approach to Spinoza in more detail, it becomes legible as part of Derrida's concern with philosophy as a project that necessitates continual reflection on its theological-political implications.

These may suffice as initial remarks on the necessity of attending to the particularity of Derrida's style and manner as crucial features, which give us important clues to his approach to Spinoza. Yet, my interest in

this context cuts both ways, since with Derrida's particular approach to Spinoza certain aspects of Spinoza's thought come to the fore that, in turn, offer the opportunity for a better understanding of Derrida.

For Derrida, Spinoza figures as a reference point in the strategic positioning of his own project. Few as the explicit points of reference might appear where Derrida comes to speak of Spinoza, they serve as pointedly positioned clues commanding the reader's attention. There are two texts in particular where Spinoza functions as 'renvois' or send back flagging the reader's attention. The first occurs in "Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German." It is here that Derrida notes the blatant absence of Spinoza in Cohen's "fantastic cavalcade, this galloping of a Jewish-German historian of philosophy" that agitates the mobilization of the past in Cohen's first war text on "*Deutschtum und Judentum*", "a feature" – Derrida comments – "that he will have in common with Heidegger in what is for both a meditation on the *logon didonai* and on the Principle of Reason." And he continues: "There would be a great deal to say about this common silence." A silence, which assumes pointed eloquence if carefully read as the next sentence suggests: "All the more so since Cohen talks abundantly about Mendelssohn."¹ Derrida's point goes to the very heart of the problem of Cohen's peculiar construction of an argument whose idiosyncratic move rests on a curious form of displacement. Indeed, obfuscating the link between Mendelssohn and Spinoza has led to an oddly curtailed vision that Cohen sought to instrumentalize for tactical reasons in a culture war he was prepared to fight with Pyrrhic heroism.²

The second passage occurs in *Rogues* where, in the context of a discussion of the concept of ground in Heidegger and his use of Leibniz, in a striking aside Derrida observes the "resounding silence concerning Spinoza."³ The enigmatic character of this almost oblique reference reiterates a strand that occasionally surfaces but seems firmly embedded in Derrida's thought. The coy signal playfully enacts the argument it makes. Both passages highlight the problem of the undeniable, if occasionally repressed presence of an absence that Spinoza occupies in the discourse of contemporary philosophy. It is one of the great instances of Derrida reading the lacuna, the silence, the absent, the revenant that haunts any reading that plays along unthinkingly without questioning the protocol of forgetfulness. Indeed, Spinoza returns, so to speak, as a ghost that haunts those who suppress him. In this context we may recall Spinoza's own view of dreams and dreamlike appearances that resonates in interesting ways with Derrida's take on the question of

spectrality.⁴ And indeed, in his discussion of Scholem in “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano,” Derrida will invoke Spinoza as the interlocutor Scholem would so purposefully avoid.⁵ This failure reflects critically on Scholem as Derrida suggests. Indeed, Spinoza’s absence in the work and thought of Scholem is yet to be fully examined as the silencing that may have challenged Scholem’s agenda of enshrining his version of the narrative of the Kabbalist and mystical traditions at the center of Jewish tradition.

Both citations of Spinoza quoted above point to the theological-political aspect of the role that Spinoza plays in the discourse of philosophy. Spinoza represents in both cases the provocative figure whose particularity stands for a positionality that at the same time goes beyond the claims of a universalist posture of, say, Cohen or Heidegger, because it is uncompromisingly rooted in the particularity of a philosophical trajectory that resists assimilation to a universalism it complicates. The difficulty and resistance that Spinoza poses as the marginalized figure through which the narrative of the history of modern European philosophy is constructed, serves as reminder that any form of universal claim always rests on its own particular blind spot. Ignoring this leads philosophy to the betrayal of precisely the universalism that it aspires to secure. Spinoza, on the other hand, with the irreducible particularity that informs his universalism in a way that resists neutralization, represents a helpful and liberating stumbling block for any universal claim oblivious of its own particularity.

To talk or not to talk about Spinoza is thus always already itself an act that frames and is framed by the theological-political problematic of, in this case, the discourse of philosophy. For, as discourse and discipline, philosophy is defined by the theological-political conditionalities of the institution we call philosophy.

The gesture of citing Spinoza in both “Interpretations at War” and *Rogues* thus serves as more than just a coy reference. It accentuates – if only by reference – the deeper affinity between Derrida’s and Spinoza’s approach to rethinking the political and the hermeneutic question. Derrida’s framing of the argument and indeed its deep structure, the cited passages suggest, resonates with a reading of Spinoza that marks an interesting agreement with the newer readings of the French Spinoza debate, with an important difference. The difference consists precisely in the manner the question of Spinoza’s Jewishness is figured and often disfigured, i.e. eclipsed in both readings: in those that abstract and bypass the challenge of his Jewishness

just as problematically as – ironically – in those that address the issue in an openly brave and direct manner, but at the expense of trivialization if not complete anecdotal irrelevance. It is one of the virtues of Derrida's mastery of the question of how to speak and also not to speak about this complex, that it positions his approach in carefully pointed difference from contemporary approaches such as those developed by Althusser, Balibar, Deleuze, and others.

In the mid 1980s, in the context of examining the language of philosophy, the problem of exemplarity versus singularity, and the question of the theological-political, Derrida's thought turned to Spinoza. At a particular moment in these lectures he links Spinoza's early critique of Descartes in an illuminating way to the discussion on language in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. As Derrida's lectures point out, these issues are connected in such a way that the theological-political dimension figures as an issue that we cannot afford to ignore.

In these lectures, Derrida examines two trajectories in Spinoza's argument that are, ultimately, intimately linked, or so Derrida suggests: 1) the question of language, interpretation, and thought and 2) the socio-politico-theological question of the Jewish tradition, literally the question of theology, i.e. the problem of how to talk and think about God. For Derrida, the two threads are interwoven and irreducibly so. There is no meta-discourse we could use as frame of reference and so the question of hermeneutics and interpretation is tied up with a theological discourse from which we cannot abstract. We cannot step outside of theology just as we cannot step outside of language. The problem of secularization thus figures as central challenge. But the particular edge to Derrida's approach consists in the insight that via the question of the nationality of language and the issue of exemplarity, religion, just like language, has a pointedly national dimension. Derrida's argument suggests that we can only arrive at an understanding of religion and the significance of theology if we attend to the constitutive moment that the national context represents for theological discourse. The national dimension is an irreducible and formative moment. As a consequence, the discourse of secularization is defined by the particular construction of the national, which informs in each individual case the specifics of the theological-political problematic.

While secularization is often considered a universal phenomenon, Derrida reminds us that both religion and its other –if indeed secularization can be called an other, a question to which we will return later – are to be

understood as developments that are profoundly linked to the particularity of national projects. Each of these projects is distinct and should be considered in its specificity. This concern is given exemplary expression in Derrida's reading of Scholem's letter to Rosenzweig that Derrida develops in his lectures on the nationality of philosophy.⁶ His essay "The Eyes of Language" comes out of this context. The problem of exemplarity is precisely the problem that Derrida sees at the heart of the universalist discourse.⁷

Derrida on Spinoza and Language

In his lectures on "Language and Descartes' Discourse of Method," Derrida positions Spinoza as a critic of Descartes who in his first publication (and the only one he ever published under his name) already advances a challenging critique of Descartes' principles. This critique, Derrida argues, rests on a view of language that argues two points: 1) that language is a more problematic tool than Descartes claims it to be, as he uses it to ground his approach in a narrative whose fictional elements, in Spinoza's view, jeopardize the rationality of the Cartesian project, i.e. they lack a philosophically reliable ground; 2) while language is based on imagination and the particular manner in which imagination links up words and signs, there is no recourse to any outside of language. Philosophical cognition itself has to go through a critique of language and in this way philosophical knowledge is intrinsically always also a critique of language itself. But as such it will never be beyond such a critique, i.e. the method of philosophy cannot be separated from the question of language. Philosophy cannot position itself independently, so to speak, of the question of the language in which we speak about it. Descartes' recourse to narrative, and therefore to the element of fiction to anchor his method is a sign that it relies on unexamined assumptions about how language functions, which threaten the very foundation on which his method rests. Critical of such an approach, Spinoza's theory of method points out the loop of infinite regress to which any theory of epistemology is subject. For Spinoza, there is no unambiguous beginning, no origin from which knowledge can spring in pristine purity. Spinoza's treatise *De Intellectus Emendatione* will elaborate this argument in fuller detail but the critical reserve against Descartes' approach already finds expression in his first and only publication to appear under

his name, Spinoza's *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy Demonstrated in Geometric Manner* ("more geometrico demonstrata") and its appendix, the *Metaphysical Thoughts*. This is the thrust of Derrida's argument. It brings Spinoza into an eye-opening alignment with Derrida while suggesting an illuminating re-examination of the relationship between Descartes and Spinoza.⁸

Derrida's strategic repositioning of Spinoza in relation to Descartes rehearses in a telling manner Derrida's own attitude to the Cartesian approach and its symbolic significance as a stand-in for French academic thought. Just like Derrida – whose ironic attitude to the title of his long held position at the *École Normale Supérieure* is well known – Spinoza acts for his student, as Derrida points out, as "repetitor" of Descartes. But in doing so, Derrida reminds his students, teaching philosophy is itself an explorative mode that ultimately defies separation of the "content" and "form" of philosophy. Derrida thus characterizes Spinoza's first work as a first intervention that addresses the issue in a manner which questions the traditional distinction between pedagogic instruction and philosophical relevance. While Spinoza's first publication appears primarily as a work of pedagogy, the text points beyond such a distinction as it gestures towards a more comprehensive argument. When Spinoza will later call his *Ethics*, in the same manner, "more geometrico demonstrata," the title will signal that after all, to show and explain things "more geometrico" may mean more than just the display of a pedagogically conducive procedure. Spinoza's argument about the language of philosophy emerges thus from the beginning as one that interconnects epistemological, pedagogic, methodological and principal philosophical concerns as it brings out the critical significance of their nexus (DL 11, 5).

The upshot of Derrida's thoughtfully subtle reconstruction of Spinoza's critique of Descartes aims at highlighting the difference in approach to the question of method. Spinoza's critique, Derrida shows, aims at exposing the problem of Descartes' reliance on narrative to account for the justification of his methodical procedure and the role of the sign as the fundamental crux on which he bases his claims. In contrast, Spinoza's reserve with regard to the Cartesian need for narrative is grounded in his unwillingness to separate method from content, the way from its goal. As Derrida concedes, Spinoza is unable to do entirely without any kind of narrative support but his engagement of narrative follows a different protocol and purpose. Similarly, Spinoza cannot do without signs and language which

according to his view are both products of imagination and therefore of little use for the task for a methodological foundation. But Spinoza does not reject language and signs outright, recognizing them as necessary for the process of the production of knowledge; for they are the only tools we have. But he rejects the Cartesian approach that instrumentalizes them in order to establish a notion of method that, in his view, remains contingent on an insufficient conception of the fundamental role of language and imagination as constitutive agents in the production of knowledge. In contrast to Descartes', Spinoza's method is one that critically resists separation from content.

While language remains tied up with the problem of memory, fiction, and imagination, at the same time Spinoza resists claiming there is any way out. Instead, the recognition of the predicament necessitates a critical examination of the problem of language and imagination. Spinoza's epistemological reflections offer an alternative approach to language and semiotics that steers away from the idea of the possibility for ultimate justification or the grounding of language and signs in an origin, towards the view that 'the way is the end.' That the truth is the index of itself (*veritas index sui*) is merely shorthand for that view.⁹ In his epistemological treatise *De Intellectus Emendatione* Spinoza does, consequently, offer a narrative. However, it is one that remains pointedly inconclusive as to the assumption of a distinct origin and, instead, maintains the notion of the infinite regress of the loop that grounds any attempt at identifying an ultimate form of foundation.¹⁰

Narrative, as Derrida reminds his reader, remains part of the argument in Spinoza, but differently so than in Descartes. The problematic of the story line of origin is given full exposure and examination in Spinoza, but it is done so in order to flag the aporetic impossibility of ultimate grounding. In Spinoza's account, narratives of origin and genealogy prove themselves to be intrinsically infinite and open-ended.

The same is true of language. To frame a narrative of the origin of language, which in turn would serve as the matrix for narratives of change and development, be they teleologically constructed in terms of purification, improvement, and perfection, or decline, deterioration and change for the worse, would presuppose a kind of take on language that Spinoza challenges as fraught with assumptions that beg the question. Derrida leaves no doubt about how profoundly Spinoza's epistemological considerations, spelled out in his *De Intellectus Emendatione*, mesh with his *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Ethics*, to a degree that without

the recognition of this nexus, the *Ethics* and *Theological-Political Treatise* are, as Derrida notes, “inconceivable and unreadable.”¹¹ This strikingly strong claim appears in a text that is published during the very years when Derrida, as it were, rediscovers Spinoza, or more precisely, produces the close readings of his project “La langue et le discours de la Méthode” and “Nationalité et nationalisme philosophiques.”

In the essay from which the above-cited quote is taken, Derrida argues for the fundamental role of Spinoza’s critique of Cartesian epistemology and of Spinoza’s alternative of an infinite open-ended loop with regard to the conception of the idea and the foundation of language. This essay shows that Derrida did not only address Spinoza publicly in his lectures on philosophy in the 1980s in France and in America, but that his interest in Spinoza went beyond the limits of a discussion in the context of philosophy including far wider considerations that comprised literature as well. The prominent role Spinoza occupies in “An Idea of Flaubert: ‘Plato’s Letter’” is the more striking as the connection this text establishes between Flaubert and Spinoza stands at the heart of Derrida’s stimulating exploration of the role of Spinoza for Flaubert. Derrida gives his argument a surprisingly emphatic turn when he comments with regard to the nexus between the epistemological and theological-political aspects that unite Spinoza’s thought at the deep level of his philosophy:

I mean Spinoza’s idea, which neither is nor gives rise to a representation, mimetic or otherwise, nor to any idea of the idea, and which Spinoza rightly contrasts with tradition, most notably the Cartesian idea, as an act or affirmation contrasts with a reproductive copy, and even its model. This hypothesis may be reckless: while he accords Spinoza a place quite apart from, and above, the body of philosophers, Flaubert never, to my knowledge, refers to the Spinozist idea as such. But his silence should not deter us, for without that idea the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus* are inconceivable and unreadable.¹²

What Derrida so attentively and circumspectly explores in his lectures on language and in Spinoza’s critique of the Cartesian concept of method, assumes, in the exploration of Flaubert’s profound sympathy and resonance with Spinoza, the new momentum of a strikingly executed argument. The emphatic drive in Derrida’s text on Flaubert highlights the surprising but powerful undercurrent of Spinoza reception that runs through French literature and culture. As a matter of fact, the contrast between Flaubert and his adversary and rival in personal life, the Hegelian Victor Cousin, Derrida so suggestively accentuates, exemplifies the profound tensions of

the conflicted relationship between different strands of traditions in French philosophy. Thus, while an important strand of Enlightenment thought running from Bayle to Diderot, including the French encyclopedists and some of the key figures of the French literary scene, plays a crucial role in the transmission of Spinoza and his emancipatory vision of philosophy, other strands – allying themselves with the institutional ambitions of the emerging profession of the academic discipline of philosophy and seeking the authority that it promised – such as the one Cousin would represent, rely on a Cartesian agenda guided by the interest of institutionalizing philosophy as a professional activity with a teleologically narrow outlook on progress and a firm grasp of its ultimate foundation.

Read this way, Derrida's take on Flaubert is an illuminating instance of his self-positioning with regard to the problem of Spinoza's reception and, of his public acknowledgment of Spinoza's signal importance for his own critical project. Yet, it is a truism that what is said in public often goes unheard. Derrida, however, has not only provided his own theoretical take on this point, as is well known, but, more remarkably, his own case highlights the problem. At least, given all the exposure and attention that Derrida had enjoyed over the last decades of the 20th century, it is remarkable that his intervention with regard to Spinoza seems to have caused little curiosity or attention.

The theologico-politico-philosophical question is thus for Spinoza, as Derrida's reading reminds us, a question of language, of the nature and status of words, and of the nature of reading and interpreting. Spinoza's – just as Derrida's – accentuation is on the inseparability of the nexus, or more precisely, the interface of these questions. Spinoza's approach, Derrida's lectures highlight, grounds in the recognition of two seemingly competing or contradictory claims. But as Derrida points out, read in context, Spinoza's strategy productively complicates the question thereby bringing out the peculiar link between language, words, and interpretation that defines the epistemological predicament of human knowledge. Words, according to Spinoza, and therefore language, are products of imagination, of memory, and the narrative use to which they are put. For Spinoza, signification is therefore wrapped up with the linguistic dimension that defines our use of words. Consequently, there is no way to step out of the process of signification. Just as examining an idea yields another idea, or more precisely in Spinoza's terminology, the idea of an idea, but does not lead to any kind of idea that could claim any sort of primacy grounded

outside thought. As a consequence, any kind of examination and reflection on words and language remains firmly embedded within language and thought.

Whereas Descartes rests his argument on the assumption that it is possible to reconstruct a purer and intellectually originary philosophical language from the bottom up, Spinoza opposes to such a view, objecting that language remains bound to imagination and the life of the affects. Language and the process of knowledge cannot for Spinoza, in other words, be reinvented from the bottom up as the Cartesian scheme would have it. But it can be “emendated,” improved, developed, differentiated, sharpened, and honed. Remarkably, as a consequence Spinoza distinguishes himself from the Cartesian approach in how he theorizes language as incorruptible and resistant to usurpation. While he concedes in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that texts can be altered and textual transmission represents a challenge to any claim of textual intactness, Spinoza advances the view that language itself and the use of words resist arbitrary manipulation at the hands of individuals or groups. Equally, Derrida points out, Spinoza “speaks never of any corruption of language, in terms of an originary language which would have been just and true. One can and one must correct the primitive language but one cannot corrupt it” (13, 13).

There is no particular class, group, or institution to which a mandate for doing this would be entrusted. Rather, “the guardians of language are not just the experts and erudite – the interpreters – but also the people” (13, 14). Derrida here follows and comments closely on Spinoza’s central chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” where he lays out his thoughts on the hermeneutic principles of a critical approach to Scripture and its interpretation.¹³ This is also the chapter where Spinoza introduces the distinction between meaning and truth, *sensus* and *veritas*.¹⁴

The signified is not a referent outside language that serves as any kind of lever, template, or indicator of the truth. Language is the base and context in which any form of philosophical method grounds. The philosophical method cannot be completely isolated from it. As language is formed by imagination and the affects, it informs the theological-political context within which even the most purified forms of philosophical thoughts move. The theological-political complex is therefore not a predicament from which the critical thinkers could extricate themselves but a problematic that requires their utmost critical and self-critical attention.

For both Spinoza and Derrida, there is, therefore, neither a pure and uncontaminated “secular” position exempt from this problematic nor is there any claim to any privileged “theological” position that would resolve the conflict. The critical reminder of the theological-political nexus is that any claim that imagines that theology could be completely neutralized or erased is as misguided and fatal as the idea that the political could, so to speak, be reconstructed completely anew on neutral grounds. For Spinoza, the idea of replanting, i.e. transplanting, or regrounding the political on the assumption of a set of principles devoid of any theological charge or implications would not only be spurious but would only expose political life more precariously – because unawares – to the vicissitudes of theological claims. After all, for Spinoza religiosity correlates, if not converges with the highest form of rationality – but not with theology. The Political and the Theological, however, are defined or rather overdetermined by conflicted claims and counterclaims whose non-rational energies point to imagination and the affects that define, on Spinoza’s analysis, religion and politics. Philosophy is not an island that stands secure outside the fate of these forces but rather represents the project of thinking them through. But doing so is only possible if the awareness of the positionality of one’s own perspective remains firmly in scope. To claim a meta-discourse in which the contentious issues could be taken, as it were, to a ground zero level of analysis would be tantamount to forgetting about the hyphen between the theological and the political, i.e. it would mean to suppress and deny the explosive tensions that define not just the theological-political complex but also, as a consequence, the philosophical discourse that derives from it.

Derrida reminds us that Spinoza’s approach to the problem of the theological-political complex is informed by an epistemologically critical move that requires us to rethink the role of language and imagination in difference to the Cartesian paradigm. Unless we do so, any desire to reflect on the theological-political must remain doomed. Epistemologically naïve, any analysis of the problem that does not heed the critical advice of being wary of the implications of the claim to purity of a ‘meta-discourse’ would merely reiterate the kind of concept realism that has come to haunt secularist discourse so problematically. Derrida’s point is that Flaubert recognized and understood this to be a complex that refused to be declared resolved by naïve fiat. But Derrida also reminds the audience at his lectures – his students as it were – that just like the student so jealously

envied by Spinoza's friends, they are not in a privileged position, but need yet to rethink their relationship to their teacher critically.

"The question of method in general, which is our question here, is inseparable from the question of teaching," as Derrida notes (11, 4-5). At the heart of teaching stands the concept of repetition and the repetitor as its facilitator. But while the repetitor is expected to simply "repeat" and run through the already existent inventory of knowledge, what remains to be examined is the deeper link between method and teaching, "the relationship between research and philosophical meditation and teaching, between teaching in general (for example private, by correspondence, or lecture) and public teaching, run by the state or otherwise" (11, 5). Spinoza, to the dismay of his friends in Amsterdam, teaches the Cartesian principles to a young student in The Hague. But while Spinoza's friends express jealousy about the prospect of the student who enjoys the privilege of proximity, of residing under the same roof as the philosopher, Spinoza assures his friends that his student is still too young to grasp Spinoza's own philosophy. Therefore, Spinoza continues, there is no reason for envy as, in fact, he guards his philosophical distance from his co-resident. At the same time, he expresses trust that his pupil will grow to maturity before long (11, 6-7). Derrida stresses the performative contradiction that seems to inform Spinoza's approach to pedagogy. Read carefully, Derrida suggests, Spinoza's response argues that teaching the principles of Descartes' philosophy cannot just involve a mere repetition of the Cartesian position even if the student might understand it as just that. Repetition the way the student desires it, or the way Descartes imagines it just as the French education system does, is precisely what Spinoza questions and challenges and why, therefore, his own thought does not quite fit its categories. Yet, that is precisely what Spinoza seeks to teach, too, with his teaching and what Derrida, through exposing the transferential relationship of method and teaching, "repeats" with his teaching of Spinoza's teaching.

Just like the question of the relationship between method and teaching, the theological-political is a complex that resists easy resolution. But critical awareness of its problems makes it possible to pose the relevant questions and to recognize the profound impact of this complex on the project of philosophy. There are, however, no easy answers to the question of how to neutralize or, on the other hand, justify its continuous hold.

The decisive difference in Derrida's account of Spinoza that distinguishes him from the approach of his contemporaries consists in his consistent

insistence that only careful attention to the philosophical specificities of Spinoza's argument will provide the critical clues for rethinking the issues.

Derrida's step for step "repetition" of Spinoza's argument repeats in a critical manner the repetitor's task of recapitulating, by reconstructing the philosopher's line of argumentation. In doing so he renders Spinoza's thought newly legible within the theoretical context of current philosophical debates, bringing out remarkable resonances with Derrida's own critical project. If the affinities between Derrida and Spinoza allow us to revisit Spinoza's epistemological and hermeneutic thought and explore the critical force that informs his views, Derrida's engagement with Spinoza also suggests two important additional points: 1) It asks us to recognize the profound role of the link between the epistemological-hermeneutical and the theological-political concerns as one that has systemic ramifications for Spinoza. The particular edge of his philosophical trajectory can only be grasped in its full critical potential if these two threads are recognized in their intimate intertwinement at the ground level. This is what marks Derrida's reminder in his intervention in the current Spinoza debate. 2) Derrida's attention to the fundamental role of the deep link in Spinoza between the theological-political and the epistemological-hermeneutical argument also suggests that Derrida's argument about Spinoza relates to a central concern at the heart of Derrida's own philosophical project. In other words, with his discussion of Spinoza, Derrida highlights the critical role that this deep link plays in his own thought. The text on Flaubert presents itself in this context as a strikingly telling case in point: the literary and the linguistic dimension are inseparably bound to the philosophical: the very literary and the very linguistic can only be critically understood if adequate attention is paid to this nexus. But the case of Derrida's reading of Flaubert only flags an issue that drives Derrida's agenda as a whole. And not just since the 1980s and 1990s. Derrida's engagement with Spinoza, with all the differences it consciously and self-consciously marks over and against the 20th century appropriations and interpretations of the 17th century post-Cartesian Sephardi Dutch philosopher that continue to define Spinoza research, highlights the motive that informs and drives Derrida's project but that has too often and too quickly been reduced to the short, the all too short formula of "deconstruction" or whatever other trade or brand label might be attached to his thought. Yet Derrida's playful compliance would seem to solicit critical attention rather than blind subjection. But the very motive force of his deconstructive mode of thought, grounds in that link

which resonates so deeply with Spinoza – so deeply that it is Derrida’s affinity which provides the angle to stress its theoretical power in Spinoza. As a consequence, the epistemological and hermeneutic issues cannot be separated from the theological-political ones but are themselves to be understood as inseparably part of the theological-political complex that defines them. Derrida’s resistance to separating truth and method resonates with Spinoza’s in precisely this way. The problematic of epistemology and hermeneutic are grounded just as much in the theological-political as the theological-political grounds in the epistemological-hermeneutic. In the context of this constituent nexus Derrida’s own trajectory comes into view as one that has been from the very outset a project with a pointedly political and theology-critical edge. In Derrida’s reading of Spinoza, the epistemological and hermeneutic is always already the political and the theological-political. It might be a historically remarkable and suggestive proposition that Derrida would find in Spinoza, that other Sephardi philosopher, an unexpected ally in the project of taking on the philosophical-theological complex, as well as with regard to the problem of the institutionalization of the university and of philosophy in particular, from which both would find themselves excluded.¹⁵

Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, “Interpretations at War: Kant, the German, the Jew” in Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, Routledge, New York and London, 2002, 137-188, 163.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of the link between Spinoza and Mendelssohn see Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza’s Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 122. On a striking discussion of the conflicted relationship of Leibniz to Spinoza see Matthew Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005 and Willi Goetschel “Spinoza and the Claims of Modernity”, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15527>.
- 4 Spinoza’s letter to Peter Balling, letter 17, 20 July 1664, in Spinoza, *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael L. Morgan, Hackett: New York, 2002, 803f.
- 5 Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 189-227.
- 6 Derrida develops this in his lectures on nationality and philosophical nationalism. See Jacques Derrida, “Nationalité et nationalisme philosophiques” in the Archive of the University of Irvine.

- 7 For a discussion of the subject in the context of Derrida's philosophy see Dana Hollander, *Exemplarity and Chosenness: Rosenzweig and Derrida on the Nation of Philosophy* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, "La langue et le discours de la méthode," lecture 11.
- 9 The idea occurs in the Ethics 2E43Sch (veritas norma sui & falsi) and a letter to Albert Burgh ("veritas index sui at falsi"), Spinoza, letter 76, December 1675 in Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 949.
- 10 Cf. also the chapter on Spinoza's epistemology "Understanding Understanding: Spinoza's Epistemology" in Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 33-44.
- 11 Jacques Derrida, An Idea of Flaubert: 'Plato's Letter' in *Modern Language Notes* 99.4 (1984): 748-768. I thank Oleg Gelikman for having directed my attention to this text.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 767.
- 13 See Benedict Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, chapter 7, 105.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 100. See also Berel Lang, "The Politics of Interpretation: Spinoza's Modernist Turn" in Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, 217-243 and Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity* on this point.
- 15 For Spinoza on state versus private education see Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, chapt. 8, § 49, *Complete Works*, 741.