

# Why Should We Read Spinoza?

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## Abstract

Historians of philosophy are well aware of the limitations of what Butterfield called 'Whig history': narratives of historical progress that culminate in an enlightened present. Yet many recent studies retain a somewhat teleological outlook. Why should this be so? To explain it, I propose, we need to take account of the emotional investments that guide our interest in the philosophical past, and the role they play in shaping what we understand as the history of philosophy. As far as I know, this problem is not currently much addressed. However, it is illuminatingly explored in the work of Spinoza (1632–77). Spinoza aspires to explain the psychological basis of our attachment to histories with a teleological flavour. At the same time, he insists that such histories are epistemologically flawed. To study the history of philosophy in a properly philosophical fashion we must overcome our Whiggish leanings.

The history of philosophy is like a city. Epochs of frenetic activity are followed by periods of stagnation; philosophical movements, like neighbourhoods, come in and out of fashion; and within them individual philosophers rise and fall. During the last few years, accompanied by a little restoration and town planning, Spinoza has become a more prominent feature of the philosophical cityscape. He appears in the equivalents of tourist guides, archival publications, architectural monographs and local fiction, and there is even a movement to make him a heritage site.

This change of sensibility is reflected in a great range of philosophical studies, which examine Spinoza and his work from many angles, interpreting him, for example, as a Cartesian, a contributor to the Jewish philosophical tradition, an Epicurean, a Stoic, or a Machiavellian. But alongside attempts to situate him within the *longue durée* of the history of philosophy, there is also a growing interest in bringing Spinoza's ideas to bear on contemporary philosophical concerns. His work is increasingly used to help illuminate and defend a range of positions, whether panpsychism, naturalism, toleration or democracy. Appealing to the work of a historical figure to lend lustre to a contemporary debate, and simultaneously enhancing the status of the figure by according them contemporary relevance, is of course a standard strategy within the history of philosophy, and it is easy to see how such a dynamic can strengthen or undermine an approach or viewpoint. But its status as a way of doing philosophy is harder to discern. What

gains do we make by bringing historical figures to bear on our own preoccupations, and what philosophical motivations do we have for taking up this approach, which, in some of its manifestations, has been the object of stringent criticism? These questions can be addressed at many levels of generality. Rather than attempting a full exploration, my aim is a narrower one: I shall focus on a currently popular version of the approach I have mentioned, and consider how Spinoza himself might explain the fact that this approach continues to occupy a central place in contemporary history of philosophy.

Spinoza is therefore both the subject and the object of this enquiry, the object insofar as it reflects on one of the ways in which his philosophy is currently used, and the subject insofar as it offers an interpretation of an aspect of his own philosophical position. Merging these perspectives, I shall try to reconstruct what Spinoza would say about some of our attempts to use his work to illuminate our own problems, and about the approach to the history of philosophy that these attempts exemplify

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Even in its most analytical reaches, philosophy is a historical subject. It usually proceeds by criticising or embracing earlier philosophical claims, whether they are drawn from the last decade or the last millennium, and to this extent feeds upon its own past. Philosophers sometimes scan their history for the utterly alien or stimulatingly strange, but they more often turn to it for insight into positions to which they are already drawn. Those who adopt this approach look to their predecessors for anticipations of themselves, and their attention to the past is guided by their own preoccupations. In studies of Spinoza, for example, a renewed commitment to naturalism has prompted contemporary scholars to explore Spinoza's contribution to this general outlook. He is now often interpreted, in Don Garrett's words, as an exponent of 'the project of fully integrating the study and understanding of human beings, including the human mind, into the study and understanding of nature, so that human beings are not contrasted with nature but are instead understood as entities ultimately governed by the same general principles that govern all other things'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Don Garrett, 'Representation and Consciousness in Spinoza's Naturalistic Theory of the Imagination' in C. Huenemann ed., *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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To some extent, we are bound to read past philosophers in the light of our own philosophical culture, which in turn makes some features of their works apparent to us and others invisible. What we find is shaped by who we are. However, there are many ways in which our existing interests can guide interpretation, and a striking feature of much current history of philosophy is what I shall call its teleological flavour. Although it is rare for commentators to adopt a wholeheartedly teleological approach and explain particular historical events or processes by citing an end to which they contribute, we can detect a teleological flavour when the work of a past philosopher is assessed in the light of contemporary values and praised for anticipating them. We may, for instance, be invited to admire Spinoza for opening the way to modern naturalism. What makes his work worthwhile, so this interpretation implies, is that it was a step on the road towards a superior modern outlook.

Some commentators adopt this attitude with gusto. For example, Jonathan Bennett sets out, as he puts it, to ‘get Spinoza’s help in discovering philosophical truth’,<sup>2</sup> and assesses his doctrines for their contribution to this goal. According to Bennett, some of Spinoza’s positions, such as his adamant rejection of teleological explanation, offer worthy challenges to existing philosophical orthodoxies, but others do not. The final section of the *Ethics*, for instance, is ‘an unmitigated and seemingly unmotivated disaster’ (page 357). Or to take a more recent case, Jonathan Israel portrays Spinoza as the founder of a process of radical enlightenment, which he describes as issuing in ‘an abstract package of values – toleration, personal freedom, democracy, equality racial and sexual, freedom of expression, sexual emancipations and the universal right to knowledge and “enlightenment”’.<sup>3</sup> For both these authors, the value of studying Spinoza lies in his relevance to ‘our’ philosophy.

The tendency to focus on past doctrines or approaches because they are of contemporary interest, and the teleological tendency to assess them in the light of their contribution to the development of our own beliefs, are logically distinct. In principle, one might be interested in Spinoza’s naturalism because one was oneself a naturalist, while denying that it played any significant role in the development of the forms of naturalism that are widespread today. In practice, however, the two often go together. Finding something of ourselves

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), para. 9, page 35.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 11.

in Spinoza's philosophy slides easily into the teleologically-flavoured project of arguing or implying that what makes this aspect of his work significant is the fact that it anticipates our own philosophical commitments, and played some role, however indirect, in their development. Rather than merely noting resemblances, we tend to build them into narratives tinged with grandeur, in which our own era is represented as more insightful and better attuned to the truth than any of its predecessors.

Nevertheless, as historians are well aware, teleologically-flavoured interpretations are fraught with danger. Writing in 1931, Herbert Butterfield coined the term 'Whig history' to describe narratives that portray the past as marching towards the enlightened condition of democratic liberalism, and criticised them on several grounds.<sup>4</sup> Advocates of the Whig approach, he argued, assume that past figures or traditions shared our own conceptions of what is true and interesting, and therefore look to them for anticipations of their own philosophical problems; but in doing so, they run the risk of suppressing past attitudes or points of view that diverge from their own. Their tendency to homogenise history is in turn liable to distort it by excluding or overlooking unfamiliar ideas and constructing a factitious continuity between past and present. Reinforcing a rhetorical conception of philosophy as the study of age-old problems, it sounds a note of comforting steadiness, while at the same time introducing an overtone of tedium. It produces a history that is already playing fragments of our tune, waiting for us to harmonise them. Still worse, this approach can turn into an indirect exercise in self-congratulation, in which some of our ancestors are criticised for failing to get the point, while others are patted on the back for anticipating our beliefs. Bertrand Russell, for example, dismisses Spinoza's metaphysics as 'incompatible with modern logic and with scientific method' and consequently 'impossible to accept'.<sup>5</sup> Spinoza's failure to grasp what we know to be the truth deprives his metaphysics of any philosophical value.

A further and closely-related objection to Whig history is that, in cleaving to teleologically-flavoured interpretations, we assume that philosophy is a single unified enterprise and become insensitive to the ways it has changed over time. As well as inclining us to ignore alien doctrines, the habit of assessing the past in the light of our own convictions can blind us to unfamiliar conceptions of philosophy

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell, 1931).

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1946), 601.

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itself. For example, when Russell rejects Spinoza's metaphysics, he sets aside the possibility that metaphysics as Spinoza understood it is not a primitive version of contemporary science and is consequently not answerable to scientific standards of assessment. By assuming that metaphysics is a proto-science, Russell closes off alternative conceptions of it and thus alternative conceptions of philosophy in general.

These limitations of Whig history have often been rehearsed and are widely acknowledged; so the fact that teleologically-flavoured interpretations of the past continue to be popular suggests that not all philosophers of our own era find the standard criticisms of Whiggery conclusive. Some of them presumably think that it is possible to take a teleologically-flavoured approach to the past while avoiding the abuses criticised by Butterfield and his successors. We can mine the history of philosophy for antecedents of our own convictions, and use past ideas productively, without assuming that the figures whose work we appropriate shared our philosophical outlooks, or that their ideas have come to fruition in our own. For example, one can focus on and learn from those features of Spinoza's work that anticipate contemporary naturalism, while allowing that certain aspects of his position are incompatible with naturalism as we understand it, and that it is an open question whether his position played a significant role in the emergence of its modern counterpart. We can simply select and concentrate on historical doctrines that we find relevant, and as long as we do not stray any further into Whig territory, no harm is done. On the contrary, philosophical thinking gains a depth and richness that takes it far beyond the insights of a single era.

This view regularly resurfaces in the historiographical literature.<sup>6</sup> If we avoid the explanatory errors identified by Butterfield, it demands, what is wrong with borrowing from the past in order to do philosophy in the present? Put like this, the answer seems to be 'nothing'; yet there remains something troubling about this reply. A sense of its incompleteness stems in part from the difficulty of putting it into practice. Philosophers whose interest in history is shaped by contemporary debates are liable to do more than merely select historical doctrines they favour and run with them. They also tend to assess these doctrines in the light of their own convictions, and to this extent adopt a Whiggish stance. If one studies Spinoza as a naturalist *avant la lettre*, for example, it is difficult to avoid

<sup>6</sup> See for example Eric Schliesser, 'Philosophic Prophecy' in M. Laerke, J. Smith and E. Schliesser eds, *Philosophy and its History* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 209–35.

appealing to our own understanding of naturalism to elucidate his position, and hard to refrain from congratulating or condemning him *sotto voce* for the modernity or backwardness of his insights.

This worry may in turn generate debate about when a teleological flavour becomes unpalatable. Is there anything wrong with assessing Spinoza's naturalism as, by our standards, wanting? Why should we not applaud him for gesturing towards a disenchanted nature? The boundary between acceptable and unacceptable teleological interpretations continues to be contested, and in order to reach agreement about it we would need a clearer sense of when a teleological approach becomes flawed. What makes it admissible to include Spinoza in a history of the development of naturalism, and in what circumstances does this do violence to the integrity of his philosophical position? One way to resolve this uncertainty would be to offer a clear account of what counts as an unacceptably teleological analysis, against which individual case studies could be tested. However, it is hard to imagine a single set of criteria that would command general assent. This is partly because philosophers turn to history to achieve many goals, and no single way of separating the acceptable from the unacceptable will answer to them all. But it is also for the overlapping reason that philosophers tend to be torn between two kinds of emotional investment in their past.

To understand the persistence of the debate between Whigs and their opponents, it is not enough to focus on the intellectual strengths and weaknesses of the stances we have been considering. Also at stake are two contrasting pleasures. On the one hand, there is the anthropological pleasure that historians of philosophy take in the strangeness of the philosophical past and its lack of relation to our own outlooks, an excitement in the discovery of ideas suppressed and paths not taken. On the other hand, there is the satisfaction of recognizing ourselves in earlier traditions, thus sustaining our sense of philosophical continuity and progress. These pleasures are not exclusive (we identify difference as a departure from continuity, and continuity as a departure from difference) and philosophers who engage with the past typically feel the pull of both. But while the anthropological pleasure acts as a brake on teleological interpretation by focusing our attention on rupture and untranslatability, the pleasure of recognition inclines us to view the past in a broadly teleological spirit. To satisfy it, we look to history for anticipations and affirmations of ourselves; and from there it is a short step to explanations and evaluations of the broadly teleological kind that we have so far been examining.

If this diagnosis is right, the debate between Whigs and their opponents has an emotional dimension that helps to keep it going. To

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commit firmly to one side or the other is to forego (or attempt to forego) a powerful intellectual pleasure. Historians who are convinced of the value of Whiggish interpretations may still suffer anthropological yearnings, just as those who are officially hostile to Whig approaches may find themselves drawn to interpretations with a teleological flavour. The pleasures that we seek in studying the past do not always line up with our explicit philosophical beliefs about the methods we ought to employ, and are not completely stilled by argument.

As far as I am aware, analytical historians of philosophy have not paid much attention to this aspect of philosophical practice. While many acknowledge that individual interpreters invest emotionally in the philosophers they study, wanting them, for example, to be morally or metaphysically admirable, the affective dimension of our relation to the past is not on the whole discussed. Perhaps this is because it is seen as a psychological phenomenon that lies beyond the bounds of properly philosophical investigation; but whatever the reason, explorations of this dimension of philosophising are largely absent from current debate. One may find this is a little surprising, the more so since there has recently been an increased recognition within analytical epistemology that humans are not very good at reasoning, and more the playthings of their passions than they know.<sup>7</sup> If this is view is right, should we not bring it to bear on our own practice as philosophers? Should we not try to get some critical distance on our researches by supplementing the back and forth of argument with an examination of the pleasures, anxieties and desires that are intertwined with our explicitly intellectual convictions?

There are many ways to reconnect with the emotional aspect of studying the history of philosophy, but an attractively reflexive route turns back to the history of philosophy itself, and specifically to past philosophers for whom affects lie at the heart of our thinking and activity. Here Spinoza's work offers an obvious starting point since, for him, all thinking is a manifestation of our striving for a satisfying and empowering way of life, and philosophising, like the rest of our thinking, expresses this orientation. Philosophy, we can say, is identified as an activity that gives us a certain kind of emotional satisfaction. Together with Spinoza's analysis of the operations of our affects, I shall suggest, this conception secretes an account of the desires and pleasures underlying teleological interpretative approaches to the history of philosophy, and an assessment of their role within philosophical enquiry.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Allen Lane, 2011); Quassim Cassam, *Self Knowledge for Humans* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

It offers a hypothesis about the character and causes of our attachment to Whiggery, and opens up a fresh way to think about it.

2.

Spinoza's account of human affects is grounded on his view that, as long as an individual thing exists, it is exercising a power to maintain itself in existence. Things strive to persevere in their being by exercising their own power as opposed to being passively acted on by external things. Moreover, since this is as true of human beings as of anything else, all our activities, mental and physical, can be described at a highly abstract level as exercises of our power to maintain ourselves in existence in the face of our encounters with external things. In the human case, our disposition to preserve ourselves is manifested in our affects. Our experience of our fundamental striving takes the form of desires and appetites, and increases or decreases in our power present themselves as forms of joy and sadness. Whether we are walking down the street on autopilot or thinking through a logical proof, we are motivated by desires that are ultimately for empowerment, and are experiencing the emotional satisfactions and dissatisfactions that constitute our current power to actively maintain ourselves. This overarching disposition, which is constitutive of our human nature and does not have to be learned, shapes our sense both of ourselves and of other things. It sensitises us to our own vulnerabilities and strengths, for example through the experience pride or fear, and attunes us to the threats and opportunities that external things present, so that instead of perceiving the world in a neutral fashion, our basic orientation towards it is affective. We encounter frightening enemies rather than men with weapons, welcoming friends rather than people with open arms, and these affects in turn shape our conscious and unconscious desires. In all our relationships with external things, and all our reasoning and reflection, we use our existing power to find ways of engaging with the world that are emotionally satisfying and strengthen our capacity to take delight in our lives.

Since these general features of human nature are at work in everything we do, they underlie both our successful and our less successful efforts to empower ourselves. Much of the time, Spinoza argues, we strive to persevere in our being on the basis of a partial and confused understanding of ourselves and external things, with correspondingly limited effects. For example, we pursue short-term ends to our long-term detriment, or develop attachments to objects that make us more sad than joyful. But although this mode of striving is always with us



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and determines many features of our lives, we are to some extent able to offset its limitations by cultivating a fuller knowledge of the world, and a wiser practical sense of how to live in an empowering fashion. As Spinoza puts it, we can compensate for the deficiencies of what he calls imagining by developing what he describes as the capacity to reason or understand. Moreover, as we do so we exercise our own power and become increasingly active.

Empowering ourselves thus consists in cultivating ways of life that do justice to our existing knowledge of ourselves and our environment, and leave room for us to enhance both our knowledge and our capacity to live in the light of it. However, in the account of this unending project that Spinoza offers in his *Ethics*, he focuses on the importance of understanding ourselves. While our capacity to live in an empowering fashion is often blocked by our ignorance of the world around us, our greatest problems stem from lack of self-knowledge, which is in turn partly due to our own imaginative dispositions. Since our efforts to empower ourselves are habitually limited by psychological dispositions that beckon us down paths leading to sadness, one of our first tasks is to learn to compensate for them.

Among the most pervasive of these tendencies is a disposition to exaggerate our individual power and overestimate what we can achieve. To offset it, we need to acknowledge the extent to which we are individually dependent on external things for our wellbeing, and learn how to put this insight to work in our ways of life. Rather than struggling on our own, we need to strengthen our power to persevere in our being by joining forces with other people. However, as Spinoza goes on to argue, this project is attended by its own difficulties. To manage it successfully, we have to deal with a further ambivalent aspect of our psychology, deriving from the fact that our affects are primarily focused on those of other human beings. We experience other people as like us in the sense that they share our repertoire of affects. Just as we can respond to their emotions so they can respond to ours, and this mutual recognition is in turn reflected in our individual and collective efforts to enhance our power.

To some extent, Spinoza argues, the mere fact that we recognise other human beings as sharing our emotional constitution is enough to make us imitate their affects. Whereas we do not envy trees their height or lions their strength, we pity humans with whom we have no other connection and may desire things simply because other people want them.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, these affective

<sup>8</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics* in E. Curley ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton University Press, 1985), E3p27.

dispositions tend to operate more strongly among collectivities whose members perceive themselves as having more than their mere humanity in common. In all its manifestations, however, the imitation of the affects is a two-edged sword. As the examples of pity and competitiveness indicate, it can move us to cooperate with one another, as when pitying someone motivates us to ameliorate their suffering; but can also lead us to compete, as when the imitation of desire produces excessive demand for a scarce good that many individuals try to get for themselves.

In Spinoza's analysis, the negative aspects of the imitation of the affects are uppermost; although 'men ... are so constituted by nature that they pity the unfortunate but envy the fortunate', they are nevertheless more prone to vengeance than to compassion.<sup>9</sup> The main reason is that our efforts to empower ourselves by developing co-operative and mutually beneficial ways of life are cross pressured by an impatient tendency to try to realise our desires by imposing them on others. 'Each of us', Spinoza claims, 'strives so far as he can that everyone should love what he loves and hate what he hates' ... 'Each of us wants the others to live according to his *ingenium* or temperament'.<sup>10</sup> In addition to being drawn to people with whom we already have things in common, we try to make other individuals into the kind of people to whom we can be drawn. This goal can be achieved by various means, including force, coercive threats and offers, flattery or persuasion; but Spinoza is particularly interested in the fact that our efforts to empower ourselves by these routes are often tinged with fantasy. We tend to project our desires onto others, representing them to ourselves as people who already share our *ingenium* or temperament and are already as we want them to be. Short-circuiting the difficulties of generating a co-operative ethos, we behave as though our own affects are already shared, and view other people through the lens of our own yearnings and aspirations.

Imagining therefore shapes our conception of the people around us and the opportunities for empowerment that they afford; but our tendency to make the world in our image can also lead us to a more ambitious form of anthropomorphising, in which we imagine quasi-human agents who mirror our desires. The most striking example of this phenomenon, in Spinoza's view, is our imaginative construction of powerful, anthropomorphic deities, whose affects are analogous to our own and who have our interests at heart. Here, our disposition to respond affectively to things that are like us, and thus to other

<sup>9</sup> *Ethics*, IIIp32s.

<sup>10</sup> *Ethics* 3p31c; 4p37s.

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human beings, extends into fictional territory. We imagine that we have affective relationships with deities who are somewhat like us, and imbue non-human natural things with providential powers to respond to our needs. We come to think, as Spinoza puts it, ‘that there is someone else who has prepared those means for our use’ and that ‘the gods direct all things for the use of men’.<sup>11</sup>

Fantasies of this kind may play a role in helping a community to live harmoniously. In some circumstances, for example, a shared belief in the existence of an anthropomorphic god may produce convergent desires that bind a group of individuals together, encouraging the positive aspects of affective imitation and restraining the negative ones. However, while Spinoza by no means underestimates the power of this phenomenon, and discusses it at length in his *Tractatus Politicus*, he remains convinced that the most effective basis of co-operation lies in understanding.<sup>12</sup> To create lasting and stable ways of life, we need to discover what we really have in common with those around us, and, on the basis of this knowledge, work out how to sustain mutually empowering ways of life. Moreover, this is a philosophical as well as a political project – a matter of extending our rational knowledge of ourselves and our environment and finding ways to live as this knowledge dictates. Taking account of our tendency to imitate one another’s affects, and of the consequences of this disposition, our task is to use it to live together, not on the shaky basis of fantasy, but in ways that reflect our understanding and nurture the development of our active power.

In setting out this programme, Spinoza sometimes seems to invoke an idealised conception of philosophy as the preserve of wise individuals, who view the project of increasing our active power from on high. Since they have already achieved an exceptional level of insight into human nature, their problems lie not so much in extending their understanding as in exercising it while living amongst a less enlightened majority, bringing their knowledge to bear on the conflict and disorder of everyday politics and promoting a philosophically grounded way of life. In fact, however, Spinoza’s view is more nuanced. In any individual, understanding is mixed with imagination, and the power to live as one’s understanding dictates will be stronger and more resilient in some circumstances than in others. Although we may imitate other people’s affects to better or worse effect, the disposition to project our desires is always with us and,

<sup>11</sup> *Ethics*, I App. [1].

<sup>12</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus* in A.G. Wenham ed., *The Political Works* (Clarendon Press Oxford, 1958).

however wise we may become, continues to shape our relations with other people and things.

This being the case, historians of philosophy will remain liable to imitate one another's affects, and will be subject to the disposition to project their desires on to others. By acknowledging the part that this process plays in their study of their subject, we may be able to uncover some of the underlying pleasures and desires that draw them to specific modes of interpretation, and particularly to those with a teleological flavour. What, then, can Spinoza's discussion of our affective relations with things that we regard as like us reveal about the practice of the history of philosophy? In the first place, it suggests that this disposition will be at work in the relations between living historians, each of whom will try to achieve the satisfactions that empowerment brings by forming bonds with other whom they regard as like themselves. Those who are already teleologically inclined may, for example, try to empower themselves by joining forces, thus promoting a kind of factionalism that is a familiar feature of intellectual life. However, because individuals will also be liable to try to impose their desires on their colleagues, we should expect the relations between historians to be marked by dissent, and to give rise to conflicts that may become significantly disempowering. If Spinoza is right, competition will outweigh co-operation.

So far, we have a rather banal and pessimistic image of historical practice; but Spinoza's analysis also suggests that we should expect to find imitations of affect in the relations between living historians and the dead philosophers they study. Historians will try to satisfy their aspirations, whether for prestige, integrity or self-respect, by identifying with past philosophers who seem to them to share something of their outlook, adding lustre to their philosophical convictions by allying themselves, for example, with Plato, Confucius or Kant. More than this, however, the fact that dead philosophers cannot respond affectively to the living makes the past a particularly fertile field for projection. It provides historians with an arena, we might say, in which they can relieve the distinctively philosophical sense of lack that Novalis describes as a desire to be at home everywhere, by finding themselves in their predecessors and aligning themselves with this or that tradition. Here, then, Spinoza's account of our imaginative disposition to project our desires onto other people and things illuminates the first of the two elements that characterise teleologically-flavoured approaches to the history of philosophy, namely the pleasure we take in focusing on aspects of the past with which we can identify, and the connected tendency

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to imaginatively obliterate the differences between past and present. Much as we may try to proceed in a cool, investigative spirit, imagination is liable to sweep us along, creating empowering similarities where none exist and heightening them wherever they are to be found. In short, when we study the history of philosophy, we try to consolidate our power and satisfaction by imagining the world as answering to our desire that others should be like us.

It remains to consider whether Spinoza's psychology can also account for the second element of teleologically-flavoured interpretations of the past – the fact that such interpretations construe historical processes as steps on the road to our own superior outlooks and values. Here again our disposition to make the world answer to our affects plays a crucial role. It is, Spinoza tells us, a deep fact about human beings that we think of ourselves as purposive creatures who formulate short- and long-term ends and assess states of affairs in relation to these goals. Furthermore, we unselfconsciously attribute this mode of operating to other kinds of things, taking it, for example, that other animals are designed to serve our purposes. Pressing this line of interpretation a stage further, we may conceive of them as created by an anthropomorphic deity who made them for our use. Thus represented, the world is our oyster, a domain in which our desires are legitimated by nature and by God, and in which we can confidently strive to empower ourselves.

Our disposition to impose our human ends on nature therefore plays a role in satisfying our affective needs, and our attachment to teleologically-flavoured interpretations of the past forms part of this broader pattern. As Spinoza implicitly acknowledges when he criticises philosophers who dream of a long-gone golden age, dwelling on the glories of a past way of life that we can no longer realise, and that puts our own in a bad light, is liable to be dispiriting. By contrast, we gain confidence and energy from interpretations of the past that harness it to the creation of our own power, by representing our achievements as rooted in a steady process of historical growth. On the one hand, past events are construed as conducive to our values; on the other hand, they do not rival or threaten our achievements, but instead reflect back our desire for supremacy.

### 3.

We have been tracing Spinoza's use of a strategy that he describes (implausibly) as a completely novel feature of his work: the attempt to *explain* the workings of the affects. Once we take account of the

constellation of emotional habits that constitute the imitation of the affects, the persistence of teleologically-flavoured approaches to understanding the past should not in his view surprise us. We should recognise them as manifestations of a set of psychological dispositions that shapes much of our everyday grasp of the world. However, the fact that such approaches are to be expected does not mean that they are philosophically defensible, and we may also be curious to know what he thinks of them. Do they make a valuable contribution to the history of philosophy or should we eschew them as far as we can?

It is clear that Spinoza regards each of the two elements of a teleologically flavoured approach that we have distinguished – the tendency to focus on aspects of the past with which we can identify, and the tendency to regard these aspects as forming a process that culminates in our own outlook and way of life – as epistemologically flawed. Insofar as our explorations of the past are shaped by our disposition to imagine and heighten empowering affective relationships between ourselves and other things, they are not primarily responsive to the way things are. Striving to satisfy our desires, we are liable to arrive at distorted conceptions of historical events and processes. However, the disposition to misconstrue the past in this fashion is not ineluctable; we can learn to offset it by understanding the operations of our affects and learning how to identify our projections for what they are. We are not condemned to error by the very fact that we discern similarities and differences between ourselves and our historical predecessors, but rather by the way we do so, and part of the art of philosophising consists in training ourselves to be more cautious than we naturally are.

By contrast, the second element of teleologically-flavoured explanations goes with a deeper epistemological limitation. As we have seen, our affective dispositions incline us to view the past as adapted to our ends, and manifest themselves in a tendency to construct historical narratives in which our way of life provides the happy ending. But Spinoza is adamant that all teleologically-flavoured explanations are wanting. Since nature has no end, the way to understand natural events is not to posit goals to which they contribute, but to identify their antecedent causes. It is true that it can be helpful, in everyday contexts, to account for an event by appealing to its end, as when you tell me that you are turning on the tap because you want a drink; but shortcuts of this kind do not do justice to the complex pattern of causes from which particular events flow and in which their full explanation lies. Teleologically- flavoured explanation therefore rests on and perpetuates a radically misconceived view of the

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operations of natural things, including ourselves, and has no place in philosophy. In order to understand nature adequately, we must eschew such explanations, and if our histories of philosophy are to live up to the epistemological standard that philosophy sets, we must learn to do without them. Comforting as they may be, we must seek our pleasures elsewhere.

Thus conceived, philosophy is an extraordinarily demanding undertaking. The surest way to empower ourselves is to concentrate on finding out how nature is structured, how it impinges on us and how we respond to it, and in using this knowledge to build stably satisfying ways of life. We must learn to avoid the conflicts that arise from affective competition by discovering what we really have in common with other people and finding ways to satisfy our common needs. We must learn to recognise teleologically-flavoured explanations as partial and epistemologically misleading reconstructions of past events, and avoid them as far as possible. In part, then, philosophy is a matter acquiring knowledge, and requires a range of intellectual virtues such as ingenuity and dedication. But it also consists in developing the capacity to put this knowledge into practice and live as it dictates. Here a further range of epistemological virtues comes into play, of which the two most prominent are *animositas*, the determination to live as understanding dictates, and *generositas*, the disposition to do so by joining forces with others. Philosophers, as Spinoza conceives them, need to develop a particular *ingenium* or character; they must be willing to learn rather than rigidly committed to a particular outlook, and be gentle rather than aggressive, inclusive rather than exclusive, in their pursuit of understanding.

Being human, philosophers strive to empower themselves by imitating the affects of people they perceive as like them; but in doing so, they exercise their virtues. Rather than imposing their desires on others or competing with them for scarce goods, they are on the lookout for individuals who share their commitment to a philosophically-informed way of life. They employ the imitation of the affects to unite with people who share something of their temperament, and to encourage others to develop it. Moreover, once their understanding alerts them to the overarching limitations of teleological explanation, they will try to avoid interpreting their own philosophical past in a teleological fashion, and will search instead for the antecedent causes of historical events. Rather than viewing history as a prelude to their own achievements, Spinozist philosophers will study the past for insight into the continuing philosophical project of living in the light of our understanding.

There seem, then, to be two ways in which the study of the history of philosophy can further the philosophical project as Spinoza conceives of it. First and most straightforwardly, dead philosophers may teach us how nature operates. Spinoza, for example, is interested in the natural philosophy of his era, particularly the work of Bacon and Descartes, and is alert to earlier theories of the affects including those of the Stoics. These figures belong to a philosophical community that encompasses the dead as well as the living and is relatively indifferent to chronology. In addition, past philosophers may help their descendants to live in the light of the philosophical knowledge they possess by offering them models or images of empowering ways of life that they can use as guides. In some cases, these will be models of the good life; for example, images of the virtuous man as discussed by Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca are all present in Spinoza's work. As well as these forms of theoretical guidance, however, Spinoza is if anything more interested in seeking historical advice about the practical aspects of philosophy. His supreme exemplar of a philosophical life is that of Jesus Christ; and he clearly thinks that there are many other accounts of the lives of rulers and statesmen from which we can draw lessons about the art of good government. The philosophical community, as he now begins to portray it, includes historians such as Tacitus, Livy and Josephus, statesmen such as Machiavelli, and rulers such as Alexander and Moses, whose actions or writings can inform our efforts to live in the light of our understanding.

Assessing the strategies and decisions of past legislators and sovereigns can therefore help us to learn to live together; but we also need to see how their actions contributed or failed to contribute to the security and longevity of political communities. One of Spinoza's most comprehensive historical investigations consequently focuses on the history of the ancient Hebrew commonwealth. By studying its laws and the decisions of its leaders, he contends, Dutch philosophers such as himself can identify the flaws that led to its downfall and, thereby enabling the Dutch Republic to avoid the same mistakes.

The view that Spinoza endorses therefore looks to the history of philosophy not as a source of self-congratulation or reassurance, but rather of inspiration. Living philosophers are committed to promoting a way of life in which they pool their insights and help one another to live as their shared understanding dictates; but part of this project involves drawing on the theoretical and practical insights that have come down to us in the works of philosophers, historians, prophets and rulers. Some of these figures were themselves



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engaged in the very practice of philosophy that Spinoza is advocating; they were philosophers in his sense of the term, and can help philosophers like him understand the demands of a philosophical life. Others were not. (Spinoza is emphatic, for example, that Moses was a prophet rather than a philosopher, and distinguishes the roles of philosophers and statesmen.) But the insights of these individuals can nevertheless contribute to philosophical understanding. For example, genuine prophecy can, in Spinoza's view, reveal moral truths. Equally, the political skills of rulers and statesmen can teach us how to live in the light of our knowledge, and until this knowledge is put into practice, the work of philosophy is only half done. Spinoza's conception of the community of the wise to which philosophers can turn for inspiration therefore extends more widely than we might nowadays expect. Where we tend to conceive of philosophy as a theoretical undertaking and view its history accordingly, he sees it as the collective project of learning to live as powerfully as possible in the light of a true understanding of nature. Philosophers should consequently turn to history for both theoretical and practical insight, and make what they can of the models that have come down to them.

Returning to one of the commentators from whom we began, we can now see that Spinoza would not have objected to Jonathan Bennett's efforts to mine the *Ethics* for philosophical insights, though he would have found Bennett's conception of philosophy radically incomplete. Where Bennett treats philosophy as a theoretical undertaking, Spinoza regards it as a practical one. Furthermore, Spinoza would have rejected the teleological flavour that characterises Bennett's work, and indeed much contemporary history of philosophy. As Spinoza's theory of the affects suggests, overcoming the tendency to think teleologically about the past is not easy. Nevertheless, in resisting it, we prevent ourselves from falling prey to an ultimately disempowering disposition to interpret nature in the light of our own purposive operations that is itself a manifestation of the incompleteness of our understanding. Interpreting the past in a teleological fashion is not blameworthy. It is an aspect of our striving to empower ourselves and answers to our affective needs. But it is not philosophy.

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