

Please cite the Published Version

Thomas, Christopher (2021) On religious and cultural objects: Articulate and inarticulate bodies in Spinoza's philosophy of nature. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 29 (1). pp. 90-104. ISSN 0966-8373

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12549>

Publisher: Wiley

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/625583/>

Usage rights: © In Copyright

Additional Information: This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of a paper accepted for publication in *European Journal of Philosophy*, published by and copyright Wiley.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

*On Religious and Cultural Objects:
Articulate and Inarticulate Bodies in Spinoza's Philosophy of Nature*

MS ID: EJP-18-114.R2

Author: Dr Christopher Thomas
Manchester Metropolitan University

Address:
Department of History, Politics and Philosophy
Manchester Metropolitan University
Geoffrey Manton Building
Manchester
M15 6LL
UK

Contact: c.thomas@mmu.ac.uk
+44 (0)161 247 6138

On Religious and Cultural Objects: Articulate and Inarticulate Bodies in Spinoza's Philosophy of Nature

Abstract

Spinoza's philosophy is often overlooked when it comes to thinking about matters concerning art and culture. While recent work has done much to address this, his philosophy remains ambiguously related to the theorisation of things such as temples, poems, and paintings. This paper argues that it is by turning to Spinoza's theorisation of the *sacred* in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that we can best derive his philosophical position on culture and its objects.

I argue that Spinoza locates the sanctity of a religious object—what he calls its 'articulateness'—in its particular use-relation with a people. In a similar manner, Spinoza locates the 'meaning' and articulateness of words in the use that people make of them, thereby secularising the sanctification process for cultural objects. I argue that this relation of 'use' between cultural-religious objects and human beings and their societies is the way in which we can best discern Spinoza's philosophical position regarding art and culture, as well as further develop his potential contribution to cultural and art theory.

Introduction

In his biography of Spinoza's life Steven Nadler claims that Spinoza was likely part of a cultural society in Amsterdam that discussed tragedy, comedy, poetry, dramatic theory, and 'other such cultural matters' (Nadler 1989: 294). Moreover, Spinoza's awareness and interest in art and culture is clear through the citations of Ovid and Seneca that punctuate both the *Ethics* and *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP).¹ Given this, the lack of explicit discussion of cultural and artistic matters in Spinoza's philosophy cannot be put down to mere indifference or lack of exposure to art and culture.²

And yet since there are no extended discussions of things such as painting, poetry, or architecture in Spinoza's works, we are left to speculate, based on certain key doctrines of his philosophy, along what lines Spinoza's thoughts might

have travelled regarding these subjects. In order to do this, certain theorists of art and culture have turned to Spinoza through a reading of the work of Gilles Deleuze.³ For instance, Simon O'Sullivan takes up Spinoza's theory of the affects to suggest an *ethicoaesthetic* understanding of art whereby artistic production and experience are posited as ethical insofar as art is seen to function as an organiser of 'productive encounters' (O'Sullivan 2006: 42).⁴ As well as art's possible ethical function as a site of joyful affects, O'Sullivan also takes up the more Deleuzian line, which is nevertheless grounded in Spinoza's theory of the affects, holding that works of art are simply 'bundles of affects' or, in the words of Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari, *blocs of sensations*.⁵ Here O'Sullivan draws upon Spinoza's theory of immanence and the affects in order to critique representational modes of artistic experience. For O'Sullivan and others like him, Spinoza's theory of the affects harbours a model for understanding art that is beyond representation and signification; the affective relation between artwork and perceiver is theorised here as an 'event', or 'happening', that is first and foremost immanent to experience and not mediated through external signifying structures (O'Sullivan 2006: 44-45).

But as well as the various concepts of the *Ethics* that might provide us with a model for thinking about art and culture, Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP) also presents several ways that we might begin to think about, for instance, architecture or literature. Here the work of Moira Gatens has been particularly instructive (see Gatens 2012, 2013, 2015). Turning to Spinoza's theory of the prophet, Gatens develops Spinoza's naturalistic explanation of prophetic power in view of suggesting that art, in Spinoza's philosophy, must ultimately be seen as an expression of the conatus of the artist which in turn is an expression of nature itself (Gatens 2015: 12-13).

And yet while these approaches to the question of art and culture in Spinoza's philosophy are original and attentive, this paper will argue that it is through Spinoza's theory of the *sacred* that we can best understand the place of cultural and artistic objects in his philosophy. By turning to the TTP I will explain and evaluate Spinoza's treatment of religious objects, and specifically his theory of the sanctity of Scripture, in view of illuminating his latent thoughts on the place of art and culture within his philosophical system. I will argue that for Spinoza

both religious and cultural objects come to attain their status *as* religious or cultural objects through certain historical processes that afford them with an affective excess—what Spinoza calls an ‘articulateness’—, that in turn makes them stand in relief from the world of everyday objects.

Central to this reading of Spinoza’s theory of religious objects is the concept of ‘use’. Anything, Spinoza insists, can become sacred and divine so long as it is *used* in the correct way. The way we use things, therefore, determines their status as a particular kind of being. In Spinoza’s natural-historical reading of religion, the Bible cannot be called sacred on account of anything *supernatural* that it might be said to contain. Rather, Spinoza insists that so long I *use* (*utuntur*) the Bible religiously to promote piety, I confer upon it its sanctity through my use-relation with it (TTP Ch.12, p.165). Conversely, if I neglect the Bible, or I use it for impious purposes, then it loses its sanctity and religious articulateness (though to what degree an object gains or loses sanctity will also depend on how others also use it). But such a model of use does not just hold for religious and sacred objects. Indeed, Spinoza offers a secular version of this sanctification process when he explains that *words* acquire ‘meaning’ simply from their usage. Words, then, become meaningful, and thus culturally articulate, when they are taken up and used by a people in a certain way.

Indeed, one of the central arguments of this paper is that just as a relation of use drives the sanctification of religious objects, so Spinoza’s example of the generation of the ‘meaning’ of words suggests that the same process obtains for the becoming-articulate of other cultural bodies, such as works of art. Ultimately, then, it is the movements of history that emerge as the dominant force in the constitution of religious and cultural objects. As history determines the desires of a people in this way or that, so the objects they take up and use develop into religious or cultural objects with varying degrees of meaning and articulateness relative to the historical situation in which they are used or neglected. And so just as the movements of history determine a text with sanctity or a word with meaning, so the movements of history likewise determine a poem with a cultural articulateness that renders it affectively powerful beyond the material complexity of its body. Under Spinozism, works of art are in a very real sense realised through historical processes of use, without which they would remain affectively mute.

In the first part of this paper, and in order to contextualize the parts that follow, I put forward and develop Spinoza's 'historical method' of biblical exegesis. I show that the workings of the imagination are central to Spinoza's method of reading Scripture and that this in turn naturalizes both the content of Scripture and the Scriptural text itself. In the following sections I show that despite reducing Scripture to a part of nature like any other, Spinoza nevertheless continues to maintain its status as sacred and divine. I argue that Spinoza's naturalistic theory of the sanctification of objects is an historical process located in the *use* people make of it, which in turn is determined by the changeable desires and needs of those people. Crucially the same process follows for Spinoza's theory of the 'meaning' of words, meaning that the same process of articulation follows, albeit in a secular manner, for cultural objects. Finally, I argue that because Spinoza understands the articulateness of cultural and religious objects to be correlated to the collective desires of a people, then it is to these historical particulars that we should turn in order to understand how cultural and religious objects attain their affective power and come to stand in relief from other less articulate, non-cultural and non-religious objects.

Ultimately this means that for Spinoza the *power*, and therefore the *being*, of religious and cultural objects is always derived from the historical activity of a wider field of individuals; works of art and culture are always, therefore, *transindividually* determined. By developing the relation between *sanctity*, *use*, and *history*, this paper will elaborate upon Spinoza's treatment of the sanctity of Scripture and religious objects in view of understanding the place of artistic and cultural objects in his strong naturalism.

The 'Historical Method': Naturalising the Supernatural via the Imagination

Central to an account of art and culture in Spinoza's philosophy is his treatment of the Holy Scriptures. In Chapter Seven of the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza sets out his approach to Scripture by turning away from the

received methods of biblical exegesis and opting instead to develop a new method for interpreting the Holy Books:

To formulate the matter succinctly I hold that the correct method of interpreting Scripture, does not differ from the [correct] method of interpreting nature, but rather is wholly consonant with it. The [correct] method of interpreting nature consists above all in constructing a natural history, from which we derive the definitions of natural things, as from certain data. Likewise, to interpret Scripture, we need to assemble a genuine history of it and to deduce the thinking of the Bible's authors by valid inferences from this history, as from certain data and principles. (TTP Ch.7, p.98)⁶

Here Spinoza puts forward his now infamous 'historical method'.⁷ Before setting out his three-part breakdown of what constitutes a historical method of biblical exegesis, Spinoza describes to the reader what the content of Scripture is and from where it arrives. According to Spinoza the greater part of the Bible contains historical narratives and revelations that, in turn, contain miracles that transcend human understanding and cannot be known through philosophical reasoning (TTP Ch.7, p.99). The basis of the narratives and miracles of the Bible is the prophetic gift of a vivid imagination (TTP Ch.2, p.27 and Ch.7, p.92), and because Scripture is composed of the narratives, miracles, and revelations of the prophets, it is Spinoza's contention that the workings of the imagination should be the ground to any method of Scriptural interpretation.

Spinoza is unambiguous regarding this, stating that the revelations recounted in Scripture always occurred from God to prophet through '[...] words or in images, or by both these means together, i.e. in words and images.' (TTP Ch.1 p.15/18). Furthermore, he continues, these images and words either exist independently of the mind of the prophet or else they are imaginary and directly connected to the specific perceptions of each prophet. Apart from Spinoza's ambiguous remarks about the way God revealed himself to Christ,⁸ Spinoza is clear that the revelations of Scripture occurred through images alone, and that these images did not exist independently of the mind but were rather directly correlated to the imaginations of each prophet:

We assert therefore that, apart from Christ, no one has received revelations from God except by means of the imagination, namely by means of words or visions, and therefore prophecy does not require a more perfect mind but a more vivid imagination [...] (TTP Ch.1 p.20)

It follows from this that if the revelations of Scripture come about through the imagination of each prophet, then the images expressed in revelation will always be expressive of the disposition of the prophet confused with their material circumstances. This is made more explicit in the *Ethics* wherein Spinoza states that words and images are directly correlated to the body of those who have the images and, furthermore, that they reveal more about the affected body–*prophet*–than the affecting body–*God* (IIP16Cor.2, IIP18Schol).⁹ According to Spinoza then, the revelations of Scripture do not exist independently of the prophet’s particular being, but are rather expressive of the disposition of the body of the prophet confused with his immediate material circumstances (see TTP Ch.2 p.28/30). Recognising that prophecies were not a-temporal but fundamentally connected to the details of historical situations, Spinoza set out to understand the parables, narratives, and miracles of Scripture through the historical and entirely natural causes that led to them. In this regard Spinoza aimed to reconcile and explain the apparent *supernatural* mysteries of Scripture through the entirely natural grounds of the prophets’ imaginings.

Spinoza’s analysis of the imaginative ground to prophecy aimed to naturalise the *content* of Scripture, and this followed the *Ethics*’ wider philosophical naturalism that rejected explanations of Nature by appeal to the supernatural. As Spinoza notes, there are no ‘profound mysteries’ hidden behind the text of Scripture that only a supernatural light can reveal (TTP Ch.7 p.98). Rather, there are only the narratives and revelations of the prophets, things that are the fruits of the imagination, which in turn are outcomes of the interaction of bodies (IIP17), and which are therefore open to explanation by recourse to a natural, historical enquiry. Just as with Spinoza’s understanding of Nature in the *Ethics*, there is no ‘beyond’ to the Bible’s body. The words and images that compose Scripture’s text must be explained immanently and not by appeal to

transcendent, supernatural principles. For Spinoza everything that Scripture teaches is available from a close study of its surface, which is to say, through a study of the narratives, miracles, and individual words that compose its textual body. As Warren Montag sums up the guiding insight of Spinoza's method:

Unlike the case of God or right, Spinoza never wrote the phrase 'Scriptura, sive Natura', but he might have: the slogan indicates what makes Spinoza less the first practitioner of a critical-historical reading of the Bible or of general hermeneutics (common readings that radically understate both the extent and force of Spinoza's critique of previous approaches to the Bible) than the first philosopher explicitly to consider Scripture, that is, writing, as a part of nature in its materiality, as irreducible to anything outside of itself, no longer secondary in relation to that which it represents or expresses, a repetition or emanation of something posited as primary. (Montag 1999: 5)

Montag's analysis of Spinoza's method of Scriptural interpretation focuses on the equivalence Spinoza constructs between Scripture and Nature. Spinoza's treatment of Scripture, Montag insists upon, is a materialistic method, a materialism of biblical exegesis and of writing itself that naturalises language and Scripture positing both as bodies that can only be measured by their respective powers to affect (Montag 1999: 21). Scripture does not *represent* anything; its words and narratives are not secondary to something primary. Rather, Scripture itself is primary insofar as its body affects the reader and causes a change in their constitution.

But the question remains as to *how* Scripture becomes the kind of thing whose respective power to affect gives rise to the false belief that there is indeed a supernatural depth that determines its 'surface' with meaning. Montag is astute in highlighting Spinoza's criticism of those who try to understand the power of Scripture by conjecturing a hidden meaning to its body, a meaning that can only be understood by going beyond its material surface in search of an immaterial depth that is *supernatural*. But it is in Spinoza's understanding of the *use* of religious objects that can be found a fuller understanding as to how Spinoza maintains the primacy of the materiality of Scripture, whilst also affording it a

sacredness and increased power to affect beyond the materiality of its body alone. The question as to how a thing can be both natural and divine, materially simple and affectively powerful, is the question that the following section will aim to answer.

The Sanctity of Scripture and the Articulateness of Bodies

Foreseeing the problems that his treatment of Scripture raises, in Chapter Twelve of the TTP Spinoza sets out to reconcile the sacredness and power of Scripture with his claim that the Bible is just another part of nature that must be treated like any other natural body. Objecting to the allegations of impiety he anticipates levelled against him, Spinoza will show that although Scripture is to be treated like any other thing in nature, it nevertheless can still be called sacred and divine and thus be differentiated from other merely 'natural' bodies. To this aim Spinoza begins his account of the sanctity of Scripture stating that he will '[...] show on what grounds Scripture, or any inarticulate object [*quæcunque res muta*], could be called sacred and divine.' (TTP Ch.12, p.164, emphasis added).¹⁰

In this opening remark Spinoza sets up a relationship between Scripture and 'any inarticulate object' that will be developed throughout the chapter not as a relation of opposition or alternative, but of ontological equivalence. Hence in the section that follows the above citation Spinoza appends: 'Something intended to promote the practice of piety and religion is called sacred and divine and is sacred only so long as people use [*utuntur*] it religiously' (TTP Ch.12, p.165). Expanding on the connection between Scripture and articulateness Spinoza connects the sanctity of an object to its *use*, claiming of Scripture that it is its *use* (*utuntur*) as an object of worship that renders it a sacred and particularly affective and articulate body. Put simply, Scripture is called sacred because people use it religiously, and its sanctity and bodily articulateness is afforded to it through the use that external bodies make of it.

These opening remarks are as radical as they are clear and Spinoza offers various examples to further qualify what he means when he connects the sacredness and articulateness of an object to the use it is put to. A thing, Spinoza

notes, will retain its sacredness and articulateness so long as it is used for pious purposes. At one time, he recounts,

[...] a certain place was called by the patriarch Jacob 'the house of God', because there he worshipped the God that had been revealed to him. But the very same place was called 'the house of iniquity' by the prophets (see Amos 5.5 and Hosea 10.5), because in their time, following the practice of Jeroboam, the Israelites were accustomed to sacrifice idols there. (TTP Ch.12, p.165)

The 'house of God' was so called by Jacob because he used it to worship God, thus rendering it sacred and divine. However, the same building was used at a different time, the time of Amos and Hosea, for immoral purposes. Its ceasing to be used piously and its use instead as a site of iniquity shows that the sacredness and articulateness of an object fluctuates as it is put to different uses by various peoples over different periods in history. Here Spinoza's contention becomes most clear: Nothing is sacred in and of itself, but a thing is afforded sanctity only if it is determined as such by the actions of bodies external to it. Sacredness is not something contained within some sort of special or supernatural object; rather, any 'inarticulate object', by which Spinoza means any natural body, can become sacred and particularly articulate if it is used in the correct way.

And yet whilst this argument is simple in one respect—for its driving argument is chiefly to dispel the belief in the *intrinsic* sanctity of an object—, Spinoza's appeal to the 'use' people make of objects is less straightforward. For instance, Spinoza also has recourse to the notion of 'use' to develop certain key propositions in the *Ethics*, and various commentators on Spinoza have also highlighted Spinoza's unique treatment of the concepts of 'utility' and 'use'. Spinoza's original treatment of 'use' begins with his identification of the useful with two other ideas, namely, the *good*, and *agreement*. For Spinoza that which is *useful*—that which has *utility* for human beings—is also that which is *good*, whereby the good is understood as that which *agrees* with our nature. For instance, in the first definition of Part Four of the *Ethics* Spinoza defines the 'good' as that which 'we certainly know to be *useful* to us' (IVD1), and he then goes on to link the

useful—and therefore the good—to the idea of the ‘agreement’ (*convenientia*) that two or more bodies may enter into. Hence Spinoza states in IVP31Cor:

From this it follows that the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, *or* better, it is for us, and conversely, the more a thing is useful to us, the more it agrees with our nature. (IVP31Cor)

Here the use-value of an object is linked to how beneficial it is for our striving or nature. An object is useful for us when it is ‘good’ for us, that is to say, when it agrees with our nature and augments our power to strive. And yet the modern understanding of utility as a relation of dominance, as a relation of one thing *using* a subordinate other, is not what Spinoza intends when he talks of ‘useful’ relationships. When utility is thought as a relation between two things where one is seen as a *means* to achieve some end, then the Spinozian meaning of utility is lost. That we have relations of utility with other beings does not mean affirming the usefulness of the other person or object as an *instrument* in the pursuit of an end goal. Relations of utility in the Spinozian sense are not teleological but merely name the relation where two bodies affect one another in a *positive* way. A relation is useful (*utile*) because it increases my power to act, because, as Spinoza says in the definition of utility in IVP38, it renders my body capable of affecting and being affected in a great many ways. All relations of utility, then, are relations of existential agreement.¹¹

But is Spinoza’s discussion of utility in the *Ethics* the correct way in which to understand his claim in the TTP that the *use* people make of Scripture is that which determines its sanctity? Certainly Spinoza thinks that the use-relation between Bible and person can be good, and therefore a relation of agreement, insofar as the former can affectively dispose the human body in many ways (as in the definition of utility at IVP38). For instance, the Bible’s narratives and images may increase my power to act insofar as they give rise to an affective perceptibility to my body that it did not previously have. Insofar as the Bible affectively stimulates me through its images and narratives it renders me increasingly receptive to the world, and thus affords me an increased ability to act in the world. As Hasana Sharp puts it:

Useful phenomena, encounters, experiences, and beings are those that “dispose” the body so as to make it more receptive and, thereby, more active. Utility names a kind of corporeal involvement that renders affected beings increasingly open to the world and thereby increasingly able to affect others. (Sharp 2011: 102)

While Sharp doesn’t name the Bible as a ‘useful phenomena’ that makes us more receptive and active, Scripture can, nevertheless, be counted as a ‘useful phenomena’ in the respect she intends. As Moira Gatens has pointed out, the multitude are most effectively activated in their being by things such as vivid images or rousing psalms, things that are central to the content of Scripture (Gatens 2015: 6). But can this notion of utility as affective augmentation help us to understand what Spinoza means when he says that Scripture becomes sacred when it is *used* in a religious way?

Part of what it means for a human being to find something useful is that it agrees with their nature, where agreement is understood as a relation whereby one’s power to strive is increased. For a thing to be useful to us, therefore, is for it to motivate us to greater activity; the useful is, in a sense, that which *activates* us. While Spinoza’s discussion of the ‘use’ we make of Scripture is carried out in a different key, it is nevertheless the case that the use we make of Scripture *activates* the scriptural text insofar as our using it is the very thing that gives rise to its sanctity and increased power to affect. Without human beings using Scripture in a particular way it will cease to be affectively powerful, and it will remain inactive and mute as its body fails to effect the religious devotion that inscribes its body with sanctity in the first place. To this extent, Sharp’s understanding of the utility of objects as an ‘activation’ of our affective capacities *is* applicable to the way Spinoza uses the notion of ‘use’ in his treatment of the sanctity of Scripture. When we ‘use’ Scripture we affectively activate it, and when we neglect it we contribute to its affective diminishment. Indeed, Spinoza himself is clear that the concept of ‘use’ is correlated to the activation of a thing’s affective capacity, since he states that when we fail to use Scripture in a religious way, we contribute to a *deactivation* of its affective capacity. Hence Spinoza argues that as well as the

becoming sacred of a body through its use as an object of worship, an object might equally *lose* its sanctity, become inarticulate, and, in the case of Scripture, return to nothing but ‘ink and paper’ (TTP Ch.12 p.166). As an historical example of the de-sanctification, and thus de-activation of an object through its changing use, Spinoza points to ‘the house of God’ that later became known to the prophets as ‘the house of iniquity’ (TTP Ch.12 p.165). But in order to better explain the process of sanctification and de-sanctification through the different uses an object is put to, Spinoza secularises his argument and points to the example of *language*.

According to Spinoza it is ‘words’ that most easily demonstrate his theory of the becoming articulate and becoming inarticulate of bodies. *Words*, Spinoza notes, acquire a particular meaning simply from their usage (TTP Ch.12 p.165). Here Spinoza exchanges ‘sanctity’ for ‘meaning’ stating that the meaning of a word—that which a given word *articulates*—follows from its usage just as the sanctity of a body (be it a temple, text, or splinter of wood) follows from its usage. Like his theory of sanctity, then, Spinoza locates the affective activity of a word in the use people make of it.

Spinoza’s theory of linguistic signification is most extensively developed in the *Ethics* where the reader is returned, once again, to his concept of the *imagination*. At the foundation of Spinoza’s theory of words is IIP18:

If the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also. (IIP18)

Following the ‘Physical Digression’, propositions 16, 17, and 18 of Part Two of the *Ethics* focus on the imagination’s ground in the body and its affections. In terms of Spinoza’s theory of words, IIP18 sets up the human body as the associative link between at least two otherwise unconnected bodies. If two bodies affect a human body at once, then on recollecting one of them the human will also imagine the other. Spinoza continues:

And from this we clearly understand why the mind, from the thought of one thing, immediately passes to the thought of another, which has no likeness to

the first: as, for example, from the thought of the word *pomum* a Roman will immediately pass to the thought of a fruit [viz. an apple], which has no similarity to that articulate sound and nothing in common with it except that the body of the same man has often been affected by these two [NS: at the same time], i.e., that the man often heard the word *pomum* while he saw the fruit. (IIP18Schol)

As the word *pomum* affects the reader through sight and the listener through sound, and as the apple affects the observer through sight and the consumer through taste, both word and apple are understood as bodies with a certain capacity to affect. When a person is affected by two things at the same time, in this instance the fruit and the word *pomum*, that person will recall the two bodies together creating an association between them in the imagination of the affected person.¹² As Spinoza notes, the apple and the word *pomum* have no 'likeness': an apple does not sound like the word *pomum*, and the word *pomum* does not taste like an apple. But their association lies in a third party—that of the body of the affected person—who constructs a link of signification between the two otherwise unrelated bodies. This association can be both very specific and personal, as with Spinoza's example of a soldier associating a horse print with war (IIP18Schol), or it can be scaled up to be more general and mediated, as in the case of language. But whether the association is located in only one body and as such is personal and fleeting, or whether a connection is situated in many bodies and fixed across a society, Spinoza nevertheless wishes to highlight that such associative mechanisms, grounded as they are in bodies and their relations, are as tenuous and fragile as the bodies that make them.

As the relations between bodies alter and new relations are formed while old ones are broken, so the associative links constructed between things likewise change or perish. In the example of language, the word *pomum* has lost its articulateness in the modern world for certain changes in history have replaced the word-body *pomum* with the word-body *apple*. As material conditions change so the meaning that was constructed out of the association of bodies likewise changes or becomes lost altogether. For the non-Latin speaker the word *pomum*, once so invested with affective power and determinate meaning, now has as much

meaning and power as any random sound or composition of lines. Consequently, the powerful affective capacity that the word *pomum* once carried, its ability to affect the reader or listener with feelings of taste, sight, desire, or hunger, is now severely diminished so as to be almost unregistrable. Divorced of the specific historical-material conditions that invested it with an increased articulateness and specific affective power in the first place, the word *pomum* becomes just another inactive and inarticulate body.

For Spinoza then, meaning arises out of relation; which is to say, meaning is inherently connected to a certain body or set of bodies that afford an otherwise unrelated body with an articulateness, and therefore affective power, that is derived from the associative mechanisms of the imagination. Accordingly, just as the word *pomum* is equally inarticulate for a 21st century Western person as it was to a 2nd century Chinese peasant, so Holy Scripture carries no meaning or sanctity outside of the particular people that constitute and maintain its articulateness and affective power. By connecting a thing's articulateness to the use people do or do not make of it, Spinoza affirms in no uncertain terms the *relational* and therefore *historical* ground to the sanctity of Scripture. Thus, Spinoza states:

From this it follows that nothing is sacred, profane, or impure absolutely and independently of the mind *but only in relation to the mind* (TTP Ch.12 p.165 emphasis added)

By 'the mind' Spinoza here means both the imagination of a single individual, and the collective imagination that parallels the body of a society or culture.¹³ Sanctity is historical in precisely this sense: for Spinoza, the becoming sacred of a body is always connected to its relation with at least one other durational body, to the way that a body determines the mind in its imagining of one thing through its being affected by a body that has no likeness to the imagined body. This process occurs in the social imagination as well as in the imaginations of individual human beings. The articulateness of Holy Scripture is generated out of the words on its page and how they affect the reader and, once more, how these affections are communicated to other bodies and are circulated between them.¹⁴ However, because bodies fluctuate in power in both how they affect and are

affected, what comes to be articulated out of the affective relations between bodies likewise fluctuates and changes (see also IIP51Dem). According to real historical changes in the organisation of bodies, a thing's affective power is continuously lost, altered, and generated anew as it is put to different uses, or not used at all, at different times and in different places. Hence, Spinoza's recital of the Jews' disregard for the tablets of Moses and subsequent veneration of the Golden Calf is a case in point to demonstrate the relationality and historicity of a thing's articulateness (TTP Ch.12 p.165).

And yet while a body may undergo an increase or a decrease in the affective capacity of its body through the way it is used, Spinoza also points to the *variability* of affective experience that a sacred object might give rise to. As an example of an object that is not diminished in its affective power but rather undergoes an affective re-coding by the use it is put to, Spinoza points to 'the house of God' that later became known to the prophets as 'the house of iniquity' (TTP Ch.12 p.165). Here it is not that the temple loses or gains affective power, but rather that the affects its body gives rise to change as it is put to different uses. At one point the house of God was used for pious purposes and gave rise to feelings of wonder and devotion, but at another point the temple became a place where 'murderers, thieves, idolaters, and other wrongdoers' used it for impious purposes, thereby turning it into a 'den of sinners' with all the correlative sad affects that these misdeeds give rise to (TTP Ch.12p.165). As the use a thing is put to changes, so the affects it occasions will likewise change. Indeed, the affective variability that the shifting use of a body can engender is further elucidated by what Spinoza notes of music in IV Preface:

For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf. (IVPref)

Like Spinoza's treatment of music, Scripture can at once be good (and therefore useful), bad, and indifferent for the one who affectively relates to it. And so while using a thing has the effect of increasing its affective capacity, it is the *way* it is used that will determine the kinds of affects it gives rise to. Hence, while

Scripture's increased affective capacity means that it has the potential to be a 'useful phenomena' that increases a person's affective receptivity, it is this very same condition that can manifest itself negatively in the promotion of debilitating affects. To this extent, the varying 'uses' that a sacred text undergoes will determine how 'useful' that text is, insofar as the varying uses it is put to will determine the degree of agreement—the degree of affective augmentation—that it has with the body of the reader. To take Spinoza's example of music: If I am melancholic and I listen to a piece of music, then the affective complexity of the music will be activated by the way I use it, by the way my melancholy determines me to relate to things, and it will therefore function only to deepen my stupor. To the extent that the affects it gives rise to decrease my power to strive I will have less in common, that is to say, my nature will 'agree' less, with the piece of music. And yet if I use the piece of music in view of directing my attention to the beauty of its harmony, I will find agreement with the music insofar as it will augment my power to strive by activating my affective capacity (see IVP45Schol). On Spinoza's account, then, the varied *uses* one makes of a temple, sacred text, or piece of music will determine the *usefulness* of those objects for the subject that engages with them.¹⁵

Indeed, the connection between the way an object is used and the kinds of affects it gives rise to—either sad and debilitating, or joyful and generative—is key to Spinoza's understanding of the sanctity and articulateness of objects. Spinoza claims that should the meaning of sacred words become lost or wholly changed, then both words and book will 'have neither use nor sanctity' (TTP Ch.12p.165). In this instance a thing becomes useful not only because one uses it, but because one uses it in a certain kind of way, namely, piously. On the other hand, if that same object is used for impious and wicked purposes, then whilst being affectively active it will cease to have use, that is, it will cease to be good for, and agree with, the body of the worshipper.

The utility of an object, its usefulness as an object that affectively augments the one who engages with it, is dependent not only on the use that is made of it, but also on the particular way it is used. And this is key for the becoming-sacred of an object. Not only must such objects be used lest they lose their sanctity, but they must also be used in such a way that they are, in turn, *useful* for the individual

insofar as they generate joyful affects and augment the individual's power to strive.¹⁶

Ultimately, then, Scripture is determined *as* Scripture in history: it is the material conditions of a people and the affects that circulate between them that determine this or that text or temple with sanctity and affective power. But as well as this process of use applying to the sanctification of religious objects, Spinoza also extends the connection between history, use, and affective power to the cultural sphere when he explains how 'words' acquire their meaning and power. The articulateness of certain bodies like Scripture, words, buildings, paintings, and other such cultural objects is, therefore, always connected to the variable movements of history that determine which bodies are taken up and used, and which are neglected and condemned to inarticulateness. Whether poem or painting, biblical narrative or temple, all are activated in their powers by the way historical peoples relate to their bodies through varying processes of use and neglect.

The Role of History in the Articulateness of Bodies

In the above I argued that for Spinoza, the sanctity of an object is always connected to the way a wider field of individuals use or neglect it. It is these particular relations of use or neglect that activate or diminish bodies in their affective potential, and crucially this follows equally for religious objects—objects that become sacred or profane—, as it does for cultural objects—such as words that gain or lose meaning and affective power. Hence whether one turns to a temple or a poem, the affective power of that object is found in the way a wider field of individuals activate its body through the particular use or neglect they make of it. To this extent, both religious and cultural objects are radically historical insofar as their power is primarily determined by the various relations of use they undergo at any given time.

But such a model of the way things are determined in their power is not unique to Spinoza's theorisation of sacred and cultural objects in the TTP. The fact that a thing's power is realised through its relation to a wider field of bodies is also

evidenced by Spinoza's theory of individual power in the *Ethics*. For Spinoza, the power of a thing or affect can only be defined through its relation to a wider field of power relations that determine it as more or less powerful. As Spinoza notes on the power of the affects, for instance:

The nature, *or* essence, of the affects cannot be explained through our essence, *or* nature, alone (by IID1 and D2), but must be defined by the power, that is by (IIP7), by the nature of external causes compared to our own. (IVP33Dem)

Here Spinoza notes that the power of an affect can only be defined through a comparison of the various natures involved; which is to say, by a comparison of the power of the affected thing with the power of the affecting thing(s). The power of an affect, therefore, cannot be known independently of the wider field of power relations that determine it in its power, and this follows for affects as much as it does for things and individuals. As Etienne Balibar puts it:

It is the relationship of each individual to other individualities and their reciprocal actions and passions which determine the form of the individual's desire and actuate its power. (Balibar 1998: 108)

While Balibar's argument regarding the transindividual power of things in Spinoza's ontology is aimed at human individuals, it is equally applicable to non-human objects, such as the Bible or a work of art. Like human individuals, a poem or performance is always determined in its affective power through its relations with a wider field of striving individuals.¹⁷ The power of the Bible or a work of art does not, then, have its ultimate ground in the increased imaginative power of the prophet or artist that gave rise to it. Rather, the affective power of religious and cultural objects must be derived from the relations they undergo at any given time, for it is these relations of use that, as Balibar puts it, 'actuate' an object in its power. Importantly this means that the power and articulateness of a biblical narrative or painting will shift and mutate as the historical conditions under which its power is defined likewise shifts and mutates. As Spinoza notes on the articulateness of words: they lose their meaning and hence their power if people no longer 'need'

them (TTP Ch.12, p.165). If the relations under which a sacred text is rendered articulate change or cease, if what people 'need' changes in accordance with the movements of history, then the power of that body is correspondingly diminished or aided. Spinoza is most explicit about this in the following passage:

Should it [Scripture] become completely neglected, as it once was by the Jews, it is thereby rendered nothing but ink and paper and becomes absolutely devoid of sanctity and subject to corruption. (TTP Ch.12, p.166)

Scripture returns to 'nothing but ink and paper' when its body is neglected and it fails to be used in a sacred way. Regardless of the importance of the revelations and narratives that Scripture is made up of, it will entirely lose its articulateness if its body is neglected. Under different historical conditions the objects and texts that are taken up in human affairs and activated in their articulateness and affective power will change in response to what is most relevant to that time.

It is the historical conditions of a people, then, which determine religious and cultural objects and texts in their articulateness, for it is the changing conditions of a people that determine them to take up and use different objects and texts at different times and in different ways. In this way it was the historical conditions of the Jews that determined the Golden Calf as sacred whilst rendering inarticulate the tablets of Moses (TTP Ch.12, p.165), and it was a certain set of historical conditions that changed the house of God to the house of iniquity (TTP Ch.12, p.165). Ultimately this means that for Spinoza it is historical circumstance that allows this or that body to become particularly articulate or inarticulate, and ultimately it is the historical circumstances of a people that determines an object to stand in relief from the 'inarticulate' bodies of the everyday world. It is these particularly articulate and affectively active objects that emerge in Spinoza's philosophy as cultural and religious objects, objects that are expressive of particular historical conditions, of the needs and desires of a certain people at a certain time, and which remain to have an increased power to affect until the desires of a people change and they take up and use a different object or text.

As a society or culture is determined in this way or that by the movements of history, so the bodies that it takes up, use, and ascribe with meaning and affective power will likewise be altered and changed. In this way it is the variability of historical circumstance that is central to understand the place and power of cultural, artistic, and religious objects in Spinoza's philosophy.

Conclusion

In a famous essay on the methodology and discipline of art history, Erwin Panofsky suggests that the studying of works of art is a fundamentally *humanist* discipline (Panofsky 1955: 28). Art works are human records that call to mind ideas that cannot be derived from their material appearance alone. Put differently, works of art carry a meaning that does not inhere in their material body, but instead marks a relation between two or more bodies, that of the human body and the artistic body. Thus the art historian, for Panofsky, is not so much interested in the objects of art as she is interested in these objects' relation to human activity, both the activity that gave rise to them and the activity that surrounds their perception.

Spinoza's critique of a traditional kind of humanism that conceives the principles of religion, science, and philosophy in relation to a centrally located 'Man' is most forcefully made in the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*. Humanity does not occupy a privileged position in the universe and nor is it constructed in God's image; there are no goals or normative standards in nature and the things we find in the natural world are not there for humanity's needs. In this sense, and as Michael Mack has argued (Mack 2012: 33), Spinoza is an anti-humanist and this is most clear to the reader in the abstract philosophising of the *Ethics*.¹⁸ However, in the TTP a more nuanced and practical estimation of humanity and its customs and objects is given. Indeed, the TTP *is* a humanist work insofar as it takes specifically human constructions (organised religion, political states, objects endowed with meaning, language, etc.) submits them to a study, and then conceives of them in relation to the wider 'natural' environment in which they inhere. This humanist inflection is most keenly felt when Spinoza theorises the

concepts of sacredness and meaning as inextricably related to the movements of human history. It follows from this, then, that in a certain sense the study of art and culture is, for Spinoza as it is for Panofsky, a fundamentally humanist discipline.

But for Spinoza, the studying of art would be a humanist endeavour that nevertheless remains true to the metaphysical commitments of the *Ethics*. In setting out his theory of the sacred, Spinoza does not wish to re-introduce the nature-culture, or nature-divine, divide that grounds traditional humanism. Rather, he wants to account for those things such as sacred objects and works of art that stand out from the world to a greater extent than others. Put differently he wants to give an account of what is evident to us, namely, that certain objects are more active and affectively powerful than others. The TTP, then, allows us to talk with some specificity about the peculiarities of 'human affairs', and the particularly articulate cultural and religious objects bound up in these affairs, without deferring such objects to some supernatural and unknowable cultural or religious realm from which their power is said to derive.

The exceptionalism that grounds traditional humanism and which provides the basis for cultural and aesthetic theories that contrast art to nature is denied by Spinoza's philosophy, and the cultural and religious object and its creative genesis is naturalised to the status of a body subject to the same laws of nature as everything else. For Spinoza, the power of such bodies is not located in a religious *supernatural* realm, or in the transcendent mind of an artist 'genius', and to this extent they cannot be considered 'exceptional'. And yet religious and cultural bodies do, nevertheless, have 'difference' thrust upon them from without. This paper has argued that like Scripture, cultural objects come to be differentiated from other objects through their specific use-relations with human individuals, through their specific historical relation to a people. This can occur through relations with single individuals or through a multiplicity of individuals that compose a larger individual, such as a culture or society. Such a distinction between cultural and religious objects and non-cultural and non-religious objects is not a 'real' distinction, but an extrinsic and historical distinction. This historical distinction is in turn grounded in the affective relations human beings have with a certain set of objects, whereby cultural objects acquire an articulateness and

power of body that speaks of the time and place in which they are taken up and used.

The affective activation of such bodies is central to this end and I have argued that for Spinoza the articulateness of a religious or cultural object arises out of the use-relations of bodies and the workings of the imagination. The meaning and articulateness of an object, whether temple or word, arises out of the affects that a body has on external bodies and the way that those affects are committed to memory and communicated amongst a group of individuals. Once a body is invested with what might be described as an 'affective excess' then it stands out, by virtue of this excess, from the everyday background of less articulate, less active bodies. Crucially this process is fundamentally historical. The prophets wrote their books in the way their times dictated; likewise, what books and objects were taken up and afforded an increased articulateness is the result of the varying conditions of their particular times and geographical locations. Texts and paintings are actuated in their power by the activity of the particular people that surround and use them. For Spinoza such objects become *historical objects* indicative of the material particulars of the humans that use them. In this respect a Spinozist method for studying art and culture would be historicist but with the condition that history is understood not in the Judeo-Christian or Hegelian sense of a grand and linear *telos*,¹⁹ but rather as fundamentally active and continually constituted in myriad and non-linear ways. Particularly articulate objects such as works of art and sacred bodies are in a constant process of individuation; they are perpetually constituted anew by the ceaseless movement of power relations that surround them and determine them in their articulateness, and in this respect they demand to be re-assessed every time they are encountered.²⁰ Therefore, while the study of works of art affords an insight into the material conditions of the past, works of art will remain to have real effects in the world and, on the right side of history, will remain able to move bodies and continue to modify history. Spinoza would be quick to assert that *yes* works of art and the books of the prophets are to be studied historically through the workings of the imagination, *yes* we must look to their times to determine their meaning. But he would equally insist upon their possible future orientations, that is to say, their potential capacity as images and image generators that are able to

actively shape new periods and places, and hence give rise to new meanings associated with the various material conditions in which these objects might find themselves.

It is precisely on these final points that I think Spinoza's philosophy is most instructive for thinking about art. What Spinoza's theorisation of sanctity affords us is an understanding of the relationality of the scriptural text: Scripture is only scripture in relation to an other, to a reader. A text, therefore, always requires a reader to activate it, and it will always revert to nothing but ink and paper if it is not activated through this particular use-relation. But what does this mean for the being of the work of art? In contrast to the idea that a text or work of art is somehow fixed in its being, the Spinozist theory of art as always transindividually determined suggests that paintings, temples, and poems are in a perpetual and relational process of actualisation. To this extent the being of art is always, as Umberto Eco puts it, 'open' to the participation of the world around it (Eco 1989: 85).²¹

Importantly the effects of this openness can never be given in advance, and in this respect art emerges under Spinozism in all its radical potential as a site of the new. What does this mean? As the affective capacity of a temple or painting is determined by the various uses it is put to, its body will continually give rise to a variety of differing affects. As these affects shift and mutate according to the various movements of history, so the image of the world produced out of them will be continually constituted anew. Each time we encounter and re-encounter a work of art a new affective landscape will be opened up before us. Simon O'Sullivan has recently argued that this heightened ability of art to shift, mutate, and constitute its surroundings anew lies in its capacity for 'fictioning'. O'Sullivan approaches art and art practice not as a question of production and finished object, but rather as a process whereby what is produced always points beyond itself and beyond the conditions of its production. In this respect works of art are always 'untimely', always 'future orientated', and always generative of a world to come (O'Sullivan 2016: 82).²² Like the narratives and parables of the prophets, these untimely images qua works of art are both *of* the world—they speak of the times of the artists who produced them—, but they are also 'for' a world to come, for an as yet

unknown future that is always being produced out of the specific and changeable relations between text and reader, or painting and viewer.

And yet this is not to say that these possible futures will always be orientated to what is best; art's affective potential for creating new futures has often been utilised by those on a side of history not generative to joyful and free forms of living.²³ As Spinoza has shown in the TTP there can be no guarantee of a temple's promotion of piety, and there can be no guarantee that a work of art will be used in ways that affectively activate a people and promote their flourishing rather than limiting it. But as a body with an increased capacity to affect, works of art, like the Holy Scriptures, carry with them an affective capacity to produce, and be produced, in countless and as yet unknown ways.

In this paper have argued that by turning to Spinoza's theorisation of the sacred we can glean something of his philosophical position on matters concerning art and culture. Far from his rationalist and naturalistic philosophy being reductive for thinking about things such as temples or poems, I have argued that the TTP gives us a novel understanding of works of art as particularly articulate parts of nature whose affective power is activated through a use-relation with human beings. Beginning with an outline of Spinoza's biblical exegesis, I argued that his account of how any 'inarticulate object' comes to attain its articulateness and sanctity is the way through which we can best understand the power and being of works of art in Spinoza's philosophy. By claiming that the sanctity of a religious object or the meaning of a word is determined by the use people make of it, I suggested that it is ultimately the historical conditions of a people that activate and render articulate, or neglect and render mute, a cultural or religious object. To this extent this paper concluded that the power and articulateness, and therefore the very being of cultural and religious objects, must be derived from the historical particulars of a people. As the desires, hopes, and fears of a people change, so religious and cultural objects fluctuate in and out of relevance, with their bodies becoming articulate or inarticulate as historical change demands. Finally, I argued that this means a Spinozist theory of art necessitates that we repeatedly return to works of art and culture as history continuously determines them and our experience of them, in new and as yet unknown ways.

¹ For instance, in IIP31Cor, IVP17Schol, IV20, TTP Ch.5 p.73

² Of the little secondary literature that has considered Spinoza and art, see: Bal and Vardoulakis 2011, Morrison 1989, Gatens 2012, 2013 and 2015; Mack 2014; Cimini 2010 and 2012; Mignini 1981, Uhlmann 2011, Thomas 2018, Thomas 2020. For more indirect work on Spinoza and art see O’Sullivan 2006, Zepke 2005

³ For uses of Spinoza that relate him to art via Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari, see Uhlmann’s ‘Deleuze, Ethics, Ethology, and Art’ (2011a); see also Chapter Two of Stephen Zepke’s *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari* (2005).

⁴ While O’Sullivan’s reading is attentive to the details of Spinozism, it neglects to think of art as a possible site of negative, or sad encounters. As Spinoza himself makes clear, a work of art will vary in the affects it gives rise to relative to the person and the time and space in which they relate, hence Spinoza’s claim that music is good for the melancholic, but bad for the mourner (see IVPref)

⁵ On Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of art as a *bloc of sensations*, see Deleuze and Guattari’s collaborative work *What is Philosophy?* (1994) and Deleuze’s solo work *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (2003).

⁶ References to the *Theological-Political Treatise* are from Spinoza, B *Theological-Political Treatise* trans. Silverthorne, M and Israel, J (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2007). Citations are referenced by the chapter number followed by the page number of the above edition

⁷ Most commentators refer to Spinoza’s method as the ‘historical method’ or a ‘science of history’, however Etienne Balibar chooses to name Spinoza’s method a ‘critical history’ (Balibar 1998: 37) while Leo Strauss simply names it a ‘Bible science’ (Strauss 1965: 259).

⁸ See TTP Ch.1 p.19, and Verbeek 2003: 85-7 and Nadler 2011: 172-5 for plausible readings regarding Spinoza’s claim.

⁹ I follow the standard abbreviation style for the *Ethics* whereby IP12Dem denotes the Demonstration to Proposition 12 of Part One of the *Ethics*. All references to the *Ethics* are from Benedict de Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)

¹⁰ Shirley has “[...] we must now demonstrate in what sense the terms ‘sacred’ and ‘divine’ should be applied to Scripture and to any inanimate thing [...] (Spinoza 2002: 504). Curley has “[...] we must show here in what way Scripture and any other silent thing ought to be called sacred and divine [...]” (Spinoza 2016: 249)

¹¹ Aurelia Armstrong understands Spinoza’s use of ‘agreement’ as a positive relation of utility between striving individuals. It is upon this idea of agreement that Armstrong then proposes her concept of ‘relational autonomy’ in Spinoza (see Armstrong 2009: 59). Likewise, on Spinoza’s notion of utility, see also Gatens and Lloyd who develop an argument around the claim that ‘*Utility* is a central component in Spinoza’s account of how and why human beings come to develop more and more institutionally structured forms of collective life.’ (Gatens and Lloyd 1999: 92) Lastly, for an extended discussion of the relation between agreement and utility in Spinoza, see Sharp 2011 Chapter 3 (particularly pp.101-2).

¹² Mogens Laerke has usefully named this relation an ‘image conjunction’. See Laerke 2014: 532

¹³ For a reading of Spinoza that promotes the existence of an *ingenium* of a group of people, see Montag 1999: 69. For a reading that emphasizes the political utility of thinking the ‘collective imagination’ of a people in Spinoza see Saar 2015: 127. See also Gatens and Lloyd 1999.

¹⁴ Here Spinoza’s doctrine on the imitation of the affects would play a crucial role in the process of sanctification: see IIP27-31.

¹⁵ But that doesn't mean that something's use, and therefore the extent to which it is good for and agrees with an individual's nature, is a purely 'subjective' affair. Steven Nadler has recently argued, contra the subjectivist reading of the term's good and bad in Spinoza's philosophy, that the value 'good' or 'utility' we attribute to something has a 'matter of fact' status, but that this status is relational rather than intrinsic. On this see Nadler 2019: 378.

¹⁶ This raises an important problem (I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this): Under Spinoza's philosophy, would a work of art remain to be a work of art if it were delimiting in its affectivity, that is, if it disagreed with an individual's nature? Unlike Holy Scripture, whose sanctity and thus particularity *as* Holy Scripture is guaranteed by its arousal of the affect 'devotion' (see TTP Ch.12 p.165), Spinoza does not give a similar distinguishing feature for works of art and culture. Whilst I do not have the space to follow this thought fully, it is nevertheless possible to turn to the work of Moira Gatens on exactly this point. For Gatens it is the criteria that Spinoza outlines for distinguishing between true and false prophets that allows us to speculate upon the possibility of 'good' and 'bad' art under Spinozism. On Gatens' reading, the litmus test for distinguishing good from bad art is deceptively simple: "One need only enquire: does this work contribute to the perfection of human being?" (Gatens 2015: 12). Here Gatens' is claiming that good art will always agree with its perceiver and thus contribute to their flourishing. Such a claim illuminates the argument of this paper in two ways. Firstly, Gatens re-affirms one of our central points, namely, art's heightened capacity for the affective augmentation of the human individual. But perhaps more importantly, Gatens' theory of good and bad art under Spinozism does not preclude the fact that a work of art might be debilitating for an individual or society. For Gatens, such debilitating art will remain to have a place in the world but it will not be deemed 'good art' insofar as it will not have utility for the individuals who engage with it (and this degree of goodness or badness of a work of art will be determined, I have argued, by the varying uses it might be put to). To this extent it is possible that a work of art will disagree with an individual's nature and limit its power to act while nevertheless remaining to be a (bad) work of art.

¹⁷ For Balibar on the transindividuality of individuals in Spinoza see also Balibar 1997.

¹⁸ See also Melamed 2011. See also Sharp 2011: 172.

¹⁹ What Michael Rosenthal has called a 'master narrative' concept of history. See Rosenthal 2008: 111

²⁰ Indeed Warren Montag has argued that this is how we need to approach Spinoza's philosophy itself, that is to say, that his philosophy is capable of producing and reproducing itself across different historical periods, and that therefore his thought needs to be continuously returned to in order to see what parts of it have been (re)activated by the times in which it is read (Montag 1997: x, x-x,xi)

²¹ For an expanded discussion of this connection to Umberto Eco's theory of the open work, see Thomas 2018: 381-382

²² Here O'Sullivan is once again following Deleuze, and particularly Deleuze's claim in his second book on cinema that "[...] if there were ever a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet ... *the people are missing*" (Deleuze 1989: 216)

²³ For an excellent study on the connection between art and its uses by fascist political regimes, see: *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (1997) (ed.) Affron, M and Antliff, M, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

References

Affron, M and Antliff, M (ed.) (1997) *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Armstrong, A (2009) 'Autonomy and the Relational Individual: Spinoza and Feminism' in (ed.) Gatens, M *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press

Bal, M and Vardoulakis, D (2011), 'An Inter-Action: Rembrandt and Spinoza', in (ed.) Vardoulakis, D et al., *Spinoza Now*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Balibar, E (1997) 'Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality' in *Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis*, vol.71, Delft: Eburon.

Balibar, E (1998) *Spinoza and Politics*, London, Verso

Cimini, A (2010), 'Gilles Deleuze and the Musical Spinoza', in (ed.) Hulse, B and Nesbit, N, *Sounding the Virtual: Gilles Deleuze and the Theory and Philosophy of Music*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 129-145

Cimini, A (2012) *The Secret History of Musical Spinozism*, in (ed.) Lord, B *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 87-109

Eco, U (1989), *The Open Work*, trans. Cancogni, A, UK: Hutchinson Radius

Gatens, M and Lloyd, G (1999), *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*, London, Routledge

Gatens, M (2012), 'Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief', in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 20: 1, pp. 74–90

Gatens, M (2013), 'Cloud-Borne Angels, Prophets and the Old Woman's Flower-Pot: Reading George Eliot's Realism alongside Spinoza's "beings of the imagination"', in *Australian Literary Studies*, 28 (3), pp. 1-14

Gatens, M (2015), 'Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty and the Prophet and the Artist', in *European Journal of Philosophy* 23: 1, pp. 1-16

Laerke, M (2014), 'Spinoza's Language', in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 52, No. 3, July, pp. 519-547

Mack, M (2012), 'Spinoza's Non-Humanist Humanism' in (ed.) Lord, B, *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 28-48

Mack, M (2014) *Philosophy and Literature in Times of Crisis*, New York: Bloomsbury

Melamed, Y (2011), 'Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline' in Fraenkel, C et al. (eds.) *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, Springer, Springer Netherlands.

Mignini, F (1981), *Ars Imaginandi*, Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.

Montag, W (1997) 'Preface', in Montag, W and Stolze, T (ed.) *The New Spinoza*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press

Montag, W (1999) *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and his Contemporaries*, London and New York: Verso

Morrison, J (1989), 'Why Spinoza had no Aesthetics', in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 47, pp. 359–365

Nadler, S (1999), *Spinoza: A Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Nadler, S (2011), *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press

Nadler, S (2019), 'Spinoza on Good and Bad', in (ed.) Ramond, C and Stetter, J, *Spinoza in Twenty-First-Century American and French Philosophy: Metaphysics, Philosophy of Mind, Moral and Political Philosophy*, London, Bloomsbury

O'Sullivan, S (2006), *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan

O'Sullivan, S (2016) 'Myth-Science and the Fictioning of Reality' in *Paragana*, 25 2 pp. 80-93

Panofsky, E (1955), *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Middlesex: Penguin Books

Rosenthal, M (2008) 'Spinoza and the Philosophy of History', in (ed.) Huenemann, C, *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 111-127

Rosenthal, M (2010), 'Miracles, wonder, and the state in Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise', in (eds.) Melamed, Y and Rosenthal, M, *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 231-250

Saar, M (2015), 'Spinoza and the Political Imaginary' in *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 23, Number 2, Spring/Summer. pp. 115-133

Sharp, H (2011), *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalisation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Spinoza, Baruch (1985), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume I, trans. and ed. Edwin Curley, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Spinoza, Benedict de (1996), *Ethics*, in ed. and trans. Curley, E, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Spinoza, B (2002), *Spinoza: Complete Works*, trans. and ed. Shirley, S and Morgan, M. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing

Spinoza, Benedictus de (2007), *Theological-Political Treatise*, (ed.), Jonathan Israel, trans., Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Spinoza, B (2016) *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, trans. and ed. Edwin Curley, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Strauss, L (1965), *Spinoza's Critique of religion*, trans. Sinclair, E, New York: Schocken Books

Thomas, C (2018), 'From Complex Bodies to a Theory of Art: Melancholy, Bodies, and Art in the Philosophy of Spinoza' in *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Vol.22, Issue 2, Spring 2018, pp. 367-387

Thomas, C (2020) 'Brancusi's Golden Bird and Loy's Brancusi's Golden Bird: A Spinozist Encounter', in *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol 44, No 1, April

Uhlmann, A (2011), *Thinking in Literature: Joyce, Woolf, Nabokov*, London: Continuum

Verbeek, T (2003), *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'*, Aldershot: Ashgate

Zepke, S (2005), *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari*, New York and London: Routledge