

A BACONIAN HISTORIOLA MENTIS IN SPINOZA'S METHOD*

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Bacon's influence on Spinoza's thought is controversial, since this latter seems to underestimate the role of experience in achieving true knowledge. In this paper, I will investigate Spinoza's reference in *Letter 37*** to a *historiola mentis* (little history of mind) à la Bacon as an empirical-historical method to distinguish between different kinds of perceptions. My aim is to explain why Spinoza considers Bacon's little history of mind a useful tool to proceed towards the knowledge of the excellent things [*praestantissimae res*]. I will suggest that Spinoza could have been inspired by Bacon's theory of idols and his historical method, since they help distinguish between different kinds of ideas with no previous knowledge of the first causes. Moreover, Spinoza's method for interpreting the Scripture in his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* seems to be partially indebted to Bacon's account of natural and civil history and aims to clarify the practical meaning of the Scripture. According to Spinoza, a historical and empirical method might play a pivotal role by transforming human praxis and behavior according to the order of the intellect. This method has in a strictly practical function and cannot be compared to the true knowledge of things through their first causes. However, it is a fundamental part of the process directing human beings to the knowledge of the most fundamental things.

Keywords: Spinoza, Francis Bacon, imagination, method, history

БЭКОНОВСКАЯ HISTORIOLA MENTIS В МЕТОДЕ СПИНОЗЫ

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В статье обсуждается дискуссионный вопрос о возможном влиянии Бэкона на мысль Спинозы. Анализ отталкивается от отсылки Спинозы в Письме 37 к *historiola mentis* (малой истории ума) à la Бэкон как к эмпирико-историческому методу для различения разных видов восприятия. Цель работы – объяснить, почему Спиноза считает «историю ума» Бэкона полезным инструментом для продвижения к познанию наиболее прекрасных вещей [*praestantissimae res*]. Я предполагаю, что Спиноза мог вдохновиться теорией идолов Бэкона и его историческим методом, поскольку они помогают различать разные виды идей без предварительного знания о первых причинах.

* This paper is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (GA n. 725883 ERC-EarlyModernCosmology).

** I follow Edwin Curley's translations of Spinoza's works from his *The Collected Works of Spinoza* [Collected Works], vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) and vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). In citing Spinoza's *Correspondence* I will refer to letter's number in Curley's translation.



Кроме этого, метод толкования Писания в «Богословско-политическом трактате» Спинозы, похоже, также во многом обязан бэконовскому изложению естественной и гражданской истории и направлен на прояснение практического смысла Писания. Исторический и эмпирический метод в понимании Спинозы может играть ключевую роль, поскольку преобразует человеческую деятельность и поведение в соответствии с порядком разума. Этот метод имеет сугубо практическую функцию и не может сравниться с истинным познанием вещей через их первопричины. Однако он является основополагающей частью процесса, направляющего человека к познанию самых фундаментальных вещей.

Ключевые слова: Спиноза, Фрэнсис Бэкон, воображение, метод, история

Introduction

Bacon's influence on Spinoza's thought is controversial since the latter seems to have a pure rationalistic approach and underestimates the role of experience in the attainment of true knowledge. However, in Spinoza's *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* there are many Baconian elements: the young Spinoza offers an investigation into the true philosophical method necessary to emendate the intellect [Mignini, 1983, p. 23], and stresses the importance of an operative science for improving human well-being [Pousseur, 2000, p. 34] and the role that prejudices play as a powerful influence on human mental life [Gigliani, 2016].

In this paper, I will investigate Spinoza's reference in *Letter 37*¹ to a *historiola mentis* (little history of the mind) *à la Bacon* as an empirical-historical method to distinguish between different kinds of perceptions. My aim is to explain what this little history might mean and why Spinoza thinks that it is a useful tool to distinguish and order different perceptions. I will suggest that Spinoza may have been inspired by two different aspects of Bacon's philosophy: on the one hand, his theory of idols and distinction between different kinds of experiences in the *Novum organum*; on the other hand, the method adopted in his natural and civil history. Even though this 'little history' has a mainly practical function and cannot be compared to the true knowledge of things achieved through the first causes², I will argue that it nonetheless plays a fundamental role in the process that leads to true knowledge. Indeed, the latter is deeply connected with effecting a change in the human way of living. On the one

¹ I will be quoting Edwin Curley's translations of Spinoza's works from *The Collected Works of Spinoza* [Collected Works], vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) and vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). In citing Spinoza's *Correspondence* I will refer to the letter numbers in Curley's translation.

² This little history should not be conceived of as a full-blown history and as a specific discipline, but rather as an empirical-historical approach to knowledge.



hand, this ‘little history’ should help distinguish between erroneous ideas and different kinds of perception even in relation to human beings who have not achieved knowledge of the highest things. Spinoza may have envisaged Bacon’s philosophical effort in the *Novum organum*, which he had read, as a starting point to understand the varieties of ideas in the human mind and their power. On the other hand, Spinoza may have been inspired by Bacon’s civil history, which provided material to understand the possible causes of human actions and passions, and the basis of habits, while also serving a significant practical function by laying out well-founded precepts and life rules. This account of history characterizes Spinoza’s method for interpreting the true meaning of Scripture in chapter VII of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. History here plays a pivotal role, since empirical data, if correctly organized and evaluated, can be used as causes from which to draw relevant consequences in order to understand the fundamental practical teachings of Scripture.

I will proceed as follows: firstly, I will briefly address the circulation of Bacon’s works in the Netherlands and clarify which of Bacon’s works Spinoza was surely familiar with and in what contexts he refers to Bacon. Secondly, I will present Bacon’s philosophical project and his historical method. Thirdly, I will examine Spinoza’s *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, which provides a broader explanation of the method presented in *Letter 37*. Finally, I will offer an interpretation of Spinoza’s reference to Bacon. On the one hand, I suggest that Spinoza considers Bacon’s theory of idols a useful empirical (rather than metaphysical) model for classifying the erroneous ideas and perceptions of the human mind. On the other hand, Bacon’s civil history is likely influenced Spinoza’s idea of a little history, since the latter philosopher offers a method for interpreting Scripture in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, which seems to be partially indebted to Bacon’s conception of natural and civil history.

1. Spinoza’s Baconian Sources

English experimental philosophy and the founding of the Royal Society are often investigated in connection with Bacon’s project of renewing the sciences through a new method based on induction. However, Bacon’s works also circulated in Europe and played a pivotal role in developing the natural sciences in different frameworks. For the sake of the present argument, I will briefly focus on the dissemination of Bacon’s works in the Netherlands, where more editions of his works were published than in England – 41 up to 1700³.

³ In addition, two Dutch translations of Bacon’s work were published in the Netherlands: F. Bacon, *De Proef-Stucken, midtgaders, sijn heylige meditatie, en de wijsheyt der*



Many key intellectual and scientific figures, such as Isaac Beeckman and Christiaan Huygens, committed themselves to disseminating Bacon's thought in the Dutch cultural and scientific framework [Dibon, 1984]. For instance, Beeckman's interest went beyond the philosophy in *Novum organum*: he "mainly concentrated on Bacon as a historian of nature, a meticulous investigator of both natural and – at least apparently – preternatural facts" [Gemelli, 2013, p. 64]. Indeed, Beeckman critically addressed and discussed in detail many experiments that Bacon presented in his *Sylva sylvarum* [Gemelli, 2014].

Moreover, Bacon's philosophy played an important role in connection with the dissemination of Cartesian philosophy in Dutch universities. Many Baconian arguments were often presented in the works of Dutch Cartesians eager to reject and replace the traditional Aristotelian arguments – for instance, in relation to the problem of error or the use of experience in science. Thus Adriaan Heereboord (1613–1661), Descartes' eclectic sympathizer, and Johannes De Raey (1622–1702), a prominent Dutch Cartesian, used many Baconian arguments to undermine Scholastic positions and to establish a different kind of scientific method. Heereboord thought that "Bacon's empirical and qualitative physics could fit the traditional *curriculum* more than Descartes's system" [Strazzoni 2012, p. 255]; consequently, he considered many Baconian arguments more suited for an emendation of Aristotelian philosophy within universities.

In a nutshell, Bacon's works circulated widely in the Dutch Republic, where his thought was appreciated in many ways. His philosophical method in the *Novum organum*, his classification of sciences in *De augmentis scientiarum* and his collection of experiments in the *Sylva sylvarum* were used and discussed to achieve different aims, such as establishing a new kind of experimentation and developing arguments against Scholastic logic or a more reliable account of history.

In this context, Spinoza became familiar with Bacon's philosophy. The *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*⁴ was published posthumously in 1667, but Spinoza wrote it after his banishment from Amsterdam's Jewish community around 1656–1658⁵. At that time, in the years 1657–59, Spinoza probably attended some courses at the University of Leiden, where De Raey was teaching, and where Heereboord had previously

ouden, tr. by P. Boener, Leiden 1646, 1647, 1649 (as *Politiecke en de andere daftige bedenckingen*, Leiden), 1649 (as *Heylige meditatie en essayes. En nu op nieuw hier noch by gevoegt een tractaetjen van sijn coleuren en apparentien van goet en quaet*, Rotterdam); Id., *Nieuwen Atlas ofte beschrijvinge van het noyt meer gevonden Eylandt van Bensalem*, tr. by J. Williaemson, Dordrecht 1656 (see [Elena, 1991, pp. 33–47]).

⁴ Hereafter, I will use the abbreviation *TIE*, followed by the paragraph number, when citing the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*.

⁵ I follow Filippo Mignini's reconstruction of Spinoza's corpus and set the date of the *TIE* to around 1657–59, before the *Short Treatise* (see [Mignini, 1983, pp. 5–13]).



taught [Nadler, 1999, p. 163]. The University of Leiden was a particularly important place, insofar as many prominent professors openly sympathized with Cartesian philosophy. As already noted, De Raey was a professor of philosophy and lectured on natural philosophy and other subjects.

Besides, it is certain that Spinoza studied the *Novum organum*, which he quotes in *Letter 2* to Oldenburg, and Bacon's *Essays*, since in his library he had a copy of *Sermones fideles, Ethici, Politici, oeconomici: Sive Interiora Rerum. Accedit Faber Fortunae &c.* This 1641 Latin edition of Bacon's *Essays* (1625) included some parts of book VIII of Bacon's *De augmentis scientiarum*, i.e. chapters II and III [Van Cauter, 2016, p. 94]. Even though the *TIE* contains many implicit references to Bacon's *Novum organum*, Spinoza never refers to Bacon there. Still, he does so three times in his *Correspondence*.

The first time, answering a letter written by Henry Oldenburg on 16/26 August 1661, Spinoza stresses three different errors of Descartes' and Bacon's philosophy. In particular, Spinoza focuses on Bacon's account of error and rephrases some passages of the *Novum organum* that concern Bacon's theory of idols.

The second time, during his discussion with Oldenburg and Boyle concerning experiments with the reconstruction of Niter in 1663, Spinoza acknowledges Bacon's contribution and importance in the development of natural philosophy⁶.

Finally, in 1666 Spinoza answers his friend Bouwmeester's question as to whether there exists, or could exist, a method that enables one to proceed, "without either obstruction or weariness, in thinking about the most excellent things [*praestantissimae res*]" (*Letter 37*). Spinoza's answer is more complex than it appears at first glance. According to him, such a method necessarily exists and is deeply connected with the active nature of the intellect. In fact, it consists

[...] solely in the knowledge of the pure intellect, and of its nature and laws. To acquire this, it is necessary above all else to distinguish between

⁶ "Perhaps he [Boyle] has something which I cannot see to allege against the reasonings of Bacon and Descartes by which he thinks he can refute them. I do not recount their reasonings here, because I do not think the Distinguished Gentleman is unfamiliar with them. But I will say this: they too wanted the Phenomena to agree with their reason; if they nevertheless erred in some things, they were men, and I think nothing human was alien to them" (*Letter 13*, August 1663). The discussion between Spinoza and Boyle concerns the experiments presented by the former in his *Physico-Chymical Essay, Concerning an Experiment with some Considerations touching the differing Parts, and Redintegration of Salt-Peter*. The counter-experiments that Spinoza considers necessary to support Boyle's explanation of the reconstruction of Niter partially fit with the methodology provided in the second part of the *Novum organum* [Pousseur, 2000, pp. 27–28].



the intellect and the imagination, or between true ideas and the rest, namely, the fictitious, the false, the doubtful, and absolutely all those which depend only on the memory (*Letter 37*)

As we will see in section 3, Spinoza is summarizing what he has already written in the *TIE* about the true philosophical method, the power of the mind and, finally, the distinction between true ideas and other kinds of ideas (fictitious, false, etc.). (see *TIE*, 50) However, *Letter 37* seems to offer a practical solution which does not require any ontological-metaphysical knowledge of the causes of the human mind:

To understand these things, at least as far as the Method requires, it is not necessary to know the nature of the mind through its first cause, but it is sufficient to put together a little history of the mind [*historiola mentis*], or of perceptions, in the way Bacon teaches [*quo Verulamius docet*]. With these few words I think I have explained and demonstrated the true Method, and at the same time, shown the Way by which we may arrive at it. I should, however, still warn you that all these things require uninterrupted meditation, and a constant mind and purpose. To acquire these it is necessary above all to decide upon a definite way and principle of living, and to prescribe a definite end for oneself (*Letter 37*).

There are two aspects that it is important to stress. Firstly, according to Spinoza the true method makes it possible to distinguish the clear and distinct perceptions provided by the intellect from those perceptions which are provided by the imagination and depend on how external causes affect the human mind. Hence, the true method relies on the presence of true ideas and on the distinction between the intellect and the imagination. Secondly, a little history of the mind *à la Bacon* apparently helps distinguish different kinds of perception and the ideas composing the human mind without any knowledge of the first causes. This history seems to differ from the true method, since an ontological-metaphysical investigation is not vital to it, and since history provides an immediate practical tool for distinguishing and ordering human perceptions. This satisfies the requirement of immediacy established by Bouwmeester, but Spinoza highlights the need for an uninterrupted meditation and for certain life rules in order to achieve knowledge of the most excellent things at the same time. I will turn to consider the following interconnected questions: 1) why does Spinoza speak of a little history of the mind *à la Bacon* and 2) what is the relationship between this little history, which seems to serve only a practical function, and the adequate knowledge of things? Before addressing these questions, I will briefly present Bacon's philosophy in order to clarify what elements may have inspired Spinoza's reference to a Baconian little history of the mind.



2. Elements of Baconian Philosophy

At the beginning of his *Instauratio magna*, Bacon presents his project for a new institution of the sciences designed to improve human well-being. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to provide new foundations for human reasoning (IM, p. 3-4)⁷ and, above all to clear the mind from old errors and false notions. In the first book of the *Novum organum*, i.e., the second part of his *Instauratio magna*, Bacon uses the word *expurgatio*, which denotes the purification of the intellect. This consists in showing old errors and extirpating them. Furthermore, Bacon provides a theory of idols to distinguish the different causes of cognitive errors. In general, these either depend on extrinsic factors or are “rooted in the very nature of the intellect”. Consequently, it is impossible to eradicate all idols from the mind, which will remain imperfect to some extent⁸.

Bacon’s account of the rational faculties – i.e. memory, the imagination and reason – is deeply connected to his theory of idols. Indeed, all faculties “process the images (*imagines*) or impressions (*impressiones*) which have access to the mind through the senses”. “Reason’s role is to abstract notions from these impressions” [Corneanu and Vermeir, 2012, pp. 185–186] provided by memory and the senses, while the imagination, which acts as a “middle faculty” between the two. The imagination is the main source of idols even though it is not itself bad or passive. For Bacon, idols are either false images or notions that are disordered and recklessly abstracted from things. Consequently, Bacon warns us not to use the imagination without being guided by reason [Rusu, 2020, p. 3].

The tripartition of mental faculties corresponds to Bacon’s tripartition of sciences into history, poetry, and philosophy; and it is not irrelevant that Bacon starts from history in his classification [Jaquet, 2010, pp. 14–19]. Indeed, Bacon offers a new method for progressing toward a broader and true knowledge of things characterized by the alliance between experimental and rational human faculties, namely between the senses and the intellect. On the one hand, the senses and experience alone are not enough to achieve a true knowledge of things. On the other hand, the human intellect is prone to supposing that there is more order in things than there actually is and forms abstract ideas from a few

⁷ I follow G. Rees and M. Wakely’s translations of Bacon’s *Instauratio magna* from “The *Instauratio magna* Part II: *Novum organum* and Associated texts”, trans. and edit. by G. Rees and M. Wakely, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Hereafter, in citing Bacon’s works: *Instauratio magna* = IM and p.; *Novum organum* = NO, Book number, preface page or aphorism number. For instance: NO, I, 3.

⁸ The main issue concerns those errors that are rooted in human nature itself. Bacon thinks that it is not possible to eradicate all human errors, but he argues that it is possible to recognize these errors and to progress by means of his new method toward improving human knowledge and, consequently, well-being (IM, 35).



elements, which do not correspond to the true structure of the world (NO I, 124). Thus, it is necessary to maintain a connection with things through experience, and the intellect ought to order and organize the material that experience provides.

In brief, there are two relevant aspects worth stressing: firstly, recognizing the different kinds of cognitive errors is not enough to avoid them, since what is required is a method to investigate nature and achieve a better knowledge of things; secondly, this method must take both the senses and the rational faculty into account. The material processed by the intellect does not consist in a simple collection of facts; rather, it is organized in different ways and stages:

But we must not only seek and get a greater abundance of experiments, an abundance of a kind different from that made hitherto; we must also bring in a quite different method, order and process for keeping experience going, and advancing it. For unguided experience [*Vaga enim experientia*], following itself alone, is (as I said above) just groping in the dark, and it muddles men more than it informs them. But when experience starts going forward according to a certain law, step by step and steadily, then will we be able to hope for better things from the sciences (NO, I, 100).

A simple, unordered and unsystematic collection of experiments or facts does not help human beings make sense “of an overwhelming mass of disjointed and ambiguous stimuli, data, hints and clues” [Giglioli, 2013, p. 428]. There are many ways of experiencing things according to Bacon, but it suffices for the purposes of this paper to focus on the distinction between *experientia literata* and *experientia vaga*. The former corresponds to a stage of experience by which human beings can control and organize the huge amount of experience and data or – to use Bacon’s metaphor – to spell the words in the book of nature. This kind of experience differs from *experientia vaga*, since it enables one to organize different experiences and acquire solid foundations in terms of knowledge. What characterizes Bacon’s *experientia vaga* is a basic kind of experience, an unordered collection of facts, data, and experiences that do not provide any foundation for progressing toward a broader knowledge of nature. In order to achieve a better understanding of nature, a systematic and orderly mode of experience is needed, which makes it possible to organize a vast number of experiences of different sorts.

In this perspective, the role of memory and history, in the classification of sciences, is particularly important in order to achieve a true knowledge of things. Indeed, “Bacon’s model of history stresses the impartiality of history as a record of things. In order to achieve this ideal, both memory and sense play a fundamental role. The material accumulated in memory comes from the senses, which are said to be the doors of the intellect” [Manzo, 2012, p. 34]. History does not coincide merely with a specific kind of science, but plays a pivotal epistemological role as



a means to avoid the most common philosophical errors, since it provides the kind of organized material necessary to increase human knowledge and, consequently, to avoid cognitive errors. It is important to highlight that even though Bacon distinguishes between different kinds of history, in particular between natural and civil history, these have similar aims and the same programmatic function. Both civil history and natural history are deeply connected to Bacon's idea that there is a kind of correspondence between knowledge and the operative effects that human beings may produce: "Causes (axioms) and precepts as speculative outcomes derived from inductive generalizations are consequently used to enable effective action in order to alter the state of nature and man respectively" [Manzo, 2012, pp. 60-61].

3. An Analysis of the Method in the *TIE* and *Letter 37*

As already pointed out, Spinoza rephrases some key passages of the *TIE* in *Letter 37*. In the *TIE*, he offers a distinction between four different kinds of perception, which is also present in *Letter 37*:

1. There is the Perception we have from report or from some conventional sign.
2. There is the Perception we have from random experience, that is, from experience that is not determined by the intellect. But it has this name only because it comes to us by chance, and we have no other experiment that opposes it. So it remains with us unshaken.
3. There is the Perception that we have when the essence of a thing is inferred from another thing, but not adequately. This happens, either when we infer the cause from some effect, or when something is inferred from some universal, which some property always accompanies.
4. Finally, there is the Perception we have when a thing is perceived through its essence alone, or through knowledge of its proximate cause (*TIE*, 18).

It is important to note that Spinoza is still using the word 'perception' in *Letter 37*, even though he had already started working on the *Ethics*, where a distinction is made between different kinds of knowledge. In the *TIE*, his aim is to investigate which of these four kinds of perception enable us to achieve knowledge of better and true things. This is possible only by means of the fourth kind of perception, while the first two play a pivotal role in explaining the cause of human errors. These first two kinds of perception characterize Spinoza's account of the imagination⁹

⁹ I will leave out the third kind of perception, since it provides inadequate knowledge in the *TIE* but will characterize adequate knowledge based on common notions in Spinoza's mature works.



and do not fit in with his idea of science based on knowledge of the causes of things. Instead, the perception from conventional signs relies on what human beings know from others – for instance, their date of birth – and knowledge from random experience [*experientia vaga*] provides only a perception of how some properties of things appear to them. When explaining the different causes of cognitive errors in the *TIE*, Spinoza stresses the key role of these two kinds of perception. On the one hand, the first kind of perception leads to the formation of abstract and inadequate concepts of things, since it is based on arbitrary signs that do not always correspond to things:

since words are part of the imagination, i.e., since we feign many concepts, in accordance with the random composition of words in the memory from some disposition of the body, it is not to be doubted that words, as much as the imagination, can be the cause of many and great errors, unless we are very wary of them (*TIE*, 88).

A criticism of people’s common understanding follows this analysis: “They [words] are established according to the pleasure and power of understanding of ordinary people [*ad libitum, & ad captum vulgi*], so that they are only signs of things as they are in the imagination, but not as they are in the intellect” (*TIE*, 89)¹⁰. These passages clarify that there exist two different ways of ordering our perceptions: one provided by the imagination and which does not correspond to the real order of things, another provided by the intellect and offering a true understanding of things. Spinoza’s concept of *experientia vaga* further stresses this difference, since it is not defined only as something unclear and random, but as “experience that is not determined by the intellect”.

According to Spinoza, our errors do not depend on the imperfection of the intellect itself, but on our incapacity to distinguish the true and innate ideas of the intellect from the ideas provided by the imagination. This is precisely the first issue that Spinoza addresses in his answer to Bouwmeester concerning the true philosophical method. This distinction is made possible by the true method, which is a kind of “reflexive knowledge” and “shows how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of a given true idea” (*TIE*, 38). Furthermore, this method enables human beings to understand what a true idea¹¹ is by distinguishing it from other kinds of ideas, such as fictitious, false and doubtful ones. Finally, Spinoza attributes many interconnected functions to the method:

the Method must, first, show how to distinguish a true idea from all other perceptions, and to restrain the mind from those other perceptions;

¹⁰ The sentence “*ad captum vulgi*” is also present in the *Novum organum*:

¹¹ In the *TIE*, true ideas are clearly innate and all true knowledge of things is based on them.



second teach rules so that we may perceive things unknown according to such a standard; third, establish an order, so that we do not become weary with trifles. When we came to know this Method, we saw, fourth, that it will be most perfect when we have the idea of the most perfect Being (TIE, 49).

The distinction between true ideas and others ideas provides an understanding of the true power of the intellect, which enables us to achieve a clear knowledge of things. However, the method also seems to serve a practical function, since it should direct human behavior by means of rules, allowing it to proceed toward the knowledge of higher things. This is exactly the content of Spinoza's answer to Bouwmeester in *Letter 37*.

One may suppose that Bouwmeester had not read Spinoza's *TIE* at that time, even though he was familiar with the development of the *Ethics*¹² and may have been interested in knowing the difference between his friend's method and Descartes', since Spinoza's *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* had already been published in 1663¹³. These suppositions help understand why Spinoza refers to Bacon instead of Descartes¹⁴. Furthermore, the cultural and scientific framework stressed in section 1 provides a general justification for using Bacon as an example, since his works were well-known and were circulating in the Netherlands at that time. Bouwmeester himself had studied in Leiden and become a doctor in medicine in 1658. Spinoza probably expected his correspondent to easily understand what he meant by speaking of a Baconian little history. The main question is whether this reference is only general or concerns specific features of Bacon's philosophical project.

¹² In *Letter 28* Spinoza announced to Bouwmeester that he had already sent his friends, including Bouwmeester, the third part of his own philosophy, i.e. part of the manuscript of the *Ethics*.

¹³ Lodewijk Meyer stresses in the Introduction to Spinoza's *Descartes' Principle of Philosophy* that this latter only explains Descartes' philosophy and not his own philosophical thought (see Meyer's preface in [Spinoza 1985, pp. 224–230]). Furthermore, we only know Bouwmeester's question about the true method through Spinoza's own letter. Consequently, we do not know the circumstances and the exact content of Bouwmeester's letter.

¹⁴ I do not wish to deny the influence of Descartes's work on Spinoza's thought and reflection on method. For instance, Cristina Santinelli has stressed the similarity between Descartes' *Discours de la methode* and many passages of the TIE. However, the aim of this paper is to offer a plausible explanation for Spinoza's reference to Bacon here. A comparison between these three authors goes beyond the specific aim of this paper.



4. An Explanation of Spinoza's Little History *à la* Bacon

In this last section, I will suggest that Spinoza may have considered some aspects of Bacon's philosophy useful and practical tools to distinguish and order human perception. I will not suggest that Spinoza's little history can be regarded as a truthful interpretation of Bacon's philosophy, but rather that Spinoza may have seen specific aspects of it as providing a useful empirical-historical method.

In his works, Spinoza stresses that habits, abstractions and language can lead human beings to err and to develop an anthropomorphic understanding of nature. His aim is to understand how things are really connected and not how they appear to us. Even though Spinoza's philosophical project largely differs from Bacon's¹⁵, he may well have seen certain elements of Bacon's philosophy as a useful tool to conceive the variety of ideas composing the human mind. For instance, Bacon's theory of idols provides a useful classification of different kinds of errors which partly meets the need to distinguish between different kinds of ideas that is emphasized in the *TIE*. While it is true that Spinoza criticizes Bacon's theory of idols in *Letter 2*, Spinoza's general criticism of Bacon's theory of idols only refers to the idols of the Tribe. Indeed, Spinoza only quotes or rephrases passages of the *Novum organum* which concern the first kind of idol, i.e. errors that concern the human mind itself [Jaquet, 2019, p. 13]. None of the other three kinds of idols – i.e. those of the Cave, of the Market and of the Theater – implies that the human intellect is deficient in its very nature. Rather, these kinds of errors depend on non-innate causes which Spinoza himself would accept. Consequently, there is no evidence that Spinoza completely rejects Bacon's theory of idols except as regards the idols of the Cave. In his mature conception of the mind and after his distinction of different kinds of knowledge in the *Ethics*¹⁶, a classification of different ideas will only play a marginal role. Moreover, Spinoza's method aims to distinguish between the order of the imagination and that of the intellect. Bacon's effort to distinguish between different kinds of experiences and to order different empirical data may have struck Spinoza as a useful and practical way to direct human perceptions. This compels us to address the question of the relationship between the true reflexive method and history.

¹⁵ Spinoza himself stresses that he completely disagrees with Bacon's conception of God and of man (see *Letter 2*). For instance, Spinoza thinks that God and nature are the same thing, while Bacon accepts that God created nature.

¹⁶ It is important to note that Spinoza does not distinguish between true, false, fictitious, and doubtful ideas, but only – for the most part – between adequate and inadequate ideas.



Spinoza considers history, namely the empirical knowledge and classification of facts, a fundamental tool to understand and interpret the true meaning of Scripture in chapter VII of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. The fundamental meaning of Scripture is practical and a method is required to grasp it. This view presents many similarities with Bacon's civil history, in which there is an internal distinction between "perfect history" and "ruminate history"¹⁷. "Perfect history" provides the material to understand the possible causes of human actions, passions, and the foundation of habits, and has a relevant practical function insofar as it provides well-founded precepts and living rules. It is plausible that Spinoza knew, at least in general, Bacon's account of history and his internal distinction. In particular, Spinoza's method for interpreting Scripture is based on a history of it which aims to clarify its fundamental practical meaning and to identify the context and psychological causes of human action¹⁸. According to him, a history of Scripture is necessary to provide an explanation of what the prophets really heard and saw – and in what circumstances – and thus to understand the fundamental meaning of Scripture.

In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*¹⁹, published in 1670, Spinoza deals with different issues, such as the relationship between theology and philosophy, and the demonstration that freedom to philosophize does not threaten the peace of the commonwealth but is in fact fundamental for attaining it. In describing the different chapters of his work, Spinoza affirms that he "found nothing in what Scripture expressly teaches which did not agree with the intellect" and consequently that he "was fully persuaded that Scripture leaves reason absolutely free, and that it has nothing in common with Philosophy, but that each rests on its own foundation" (TTP, Pref., 24–25). This independence between Scripture and reason is demonstrated in chapter VII, where Spinoza presents his method for interpreting Scripture:

To sum up briefly, I say that the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ at all from the method of interpreting nature, but agrees with it completely. For the method of interpreting nature consists above all in putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things. In the same way, to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture and to infer from it the mind of Scripture's authors, by legitimate inferences, as from certain data and principles. For in this way everyone-provided he has admitted no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing it than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history-

¹⁷ There are other internal distinctions that I will not discuss here (see [Rusu, 2018]).

¹⁸ Marta Libertà De Bastiani has recently argued for the possible reception of Bacon's perfect history by Spinoza in his dissertation publicly defended on the 20th of June 2020 [De Bastiani, 2020, pp. 308–314].

¹⁹ Hereafter in citing the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*: TTP, chapter, paragraph.



everyone will always proceed without danger of error. He will be able to discuss the things which surpass our grasp as safely as those we know by the natural light. (TTP, VII, 2)

Here, Spinoza offers a comparison with the methods for interpreting nature and stresses the pivotal role of the history of nature. The latter should be understood in its classical meaning as the empirical knowledge, description and collection of data and facts²⁰. This method provides a foundation for each legitimate and plausible inference on nature and surpasses what human beings can know by the natural light, i.e. though their intellect. Spinoza clearly points out that this method, which starts from empirical data and experiences and is based on a history of Scripture, is the only one possible to understand the true meaning and teaching of Scripture, since this is largely composed of chronicles and miracles. This history consists of three elements: 1) an account of the nature and properties of the language of Scripture, 2) an index of the contents and 3) an analysis of the authorship, intended audience, reception, transmission, and canonization of Scripture.

This kind of history enables us to understand what the prophets saw, in what circumstances, and what they really wanted to teach. Only in such a way is it possible to discern between the universal and most common things contained in Scripture, i.e. their fundamental principles and notions, and what was taught in specific circumstances (TTP, VII, 6):

In examining natural things we strive to investigate first the things most universal and common to the whole of nature: motion and rest, and their laws and rules, which nature always observes and through which it continuously acts. From these we proceed gradually to other, less universal things. In the same way, the first thing we must seek from the history of Scripture is what is most universal, what is the basis and foundation of the whole of Scripture, and finally, what all the Prophets commend in it as an eternal teaching, most useful for all mortals. For example, that a unique and omnipotent God exists, who alone is to be worshipped, who cares for all, and who loves above all those who worship him and who love their neighbor as themselves, etc. (TTP, VII, 6)

The aim of this historical method is to understand the fundamental teaching and practical content of Scripture. This understanding requires a previous collection of historical facts and data to be organized and evaluated by means of a scientific method. Empirical facts and data may be envisaged as causes from which one can infer relevant consequences, so as to achieve an understanding of the universal teachings of Scripture. This knowledge is not immutable because there is the possibility of discovering new facts. However, it provides a useful knowledge of things

²⁰ Given this conception of history, scholars have suggested a direct influence of Bacon in these passages and on Spinoza's method (see [Zac, 1965, pp. 29–32]).



that, even though not derived from the knowledge of the first causes, is useful in order to conceive of God's existence and to regulate the human way of living in a way compatible with adequate knowledge.

It is important to note that the knowledge of the fundamental meaning of Scripture does not depend on the intellectual knowledge of first causes which can be attained only by means of the intellect. Rather, Spinoza addresses the problem of how human beings can organize experiences and historical facts so they may prove useful and, from an operative and practical perspective, help act in a way that fits with what the reason itself teaches. My suggestion is that in *Letter 37* Spinoza considers Bacon's account of civil history²¹ a useful tool to direct the human way of living, as requested by Bowmeester, even though this method does not lead to the true knowledge of things. This knowledge and the distinction of different kinds of perception through a collection of facts and experiences cannot be compared to the knowledge of the nature of the mind through its first cause²². However, it is important to highlight the deep connection between the *ratio vivendi* and adequate knowledge which characterizes Spinoza's thought. The adequate knowledge of things is the highest thing that human beings can strive for and uninterrupted meditation, living rules and certain habits are fundamental to achieve it [Santinelli, 2020, pp. 91–92]. As Spinoza clearly suggests in part V of the *Ethics*²³, in which he address the issue of the freedom of the mind, a constant effort is necessary to connect and order human perceptions:

For a greater force is required for restraining Affects ordered and connected according to the order of the intellect than for restraining those which are uncertain and random. The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, or sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready (EVp10s).

Memory, the imagination and hence experiences can play a pivotal role by transforming human praxis and behavior according to the order of the intellect. Consequently, Spinoza's little history *à la* Bacon consists in an empirical and historical method which can have a strictly

²¹ It is important to stress that Bacon's distinction between different faculties here and especially the pivotal role of memory in his account of history pose various interpretative problems.

²² Jo Van Caeter suggests that Spinoza's reference to Bacon in *Letter 37* should be understood as a part of his reflections on provisional morality (see [Van Caeter, 2016]).

²³ In citing the *Ethics* I will use the following abbreviations: 'a' for axiom; 'p' for proposition; 'd' for demonstration; 'D' for definition; 'c' for corollary; and 's' for scholium.



practical function. However, it is also a fundamental part of the process that leads human beings to the knowledge of higher things, since human beings, by changing their way of life, can also transform their way of thinking.

Conclusion

Spinoza's reference to Bacon can be understood by taking into account the scientific context of the seventeenth-century Netherlands and specific aspects of Bacon's philosophy. Since Spinoza's true method consists in distinguishing true ideas from all others, he may have considered Bacon's theory of idols and may have found his distinction between different kinds of experiences to provide a useful example of how human beings can immediately recognize and connect different kinds of ideas. On the other hand, Spinoza's reference to Bacon is deeply connected to the latter's civil history. Indeed, Spinoza provides a method to interpret Scripture which is based on a history of it and leads to the understanding of its true meaning and universal teaching. Spinoza's method for interpreting Scripture shows many similarities with Bacon's account of civil history, since it serves a similar practical aim, i.e. to provide universal precepts useful to regulate human actions. In conclusion, Spinoza believes that a little history *à la Bacon* helps immediately distinguish between different kinds of ideas, order different perceptions and direct the human way of living toward the knowledge of the most fundamental things. Even though this empirical-historical knowledge cannot be compared to the true knowledge based on first causes, it nonetheless has a pivotal practical function and is a vital part of the process which can lead to the transformation of human ways of living and, consequently, human ways of thinking.

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