

Transcript

Gil Morejon - “Imaginary authority and critical immanence: Spinoza’s critique of miracles”

Gil Morejon:

This paper subtitle promises that I'll talk about Spinoza's critique of miracles and the Theological-Political Treatise, and I will. But first I'd like to lay out what I think is at stake in my paper. What I want to argue is that perhaps the single most important point at which the theological and political of the book's title are intertwined is the problem of authority. The kind of authority that is in question here involves the operation of the imagination. Now the role of the imagination in Spinoza's political philosophy has been enjoying something of a renaissance in recent years. Perhaps the earliest instance of this is Antonio Negri's 1981 study "The Savage Anomaly" which argued for the constitutive character of the imagination. Quote: "politics is the metaphysics of the imagination, the metaphysics of the human constitution of reality, the world, imaginative activity reaches the level of an ontological statute" end quote. Similarly, Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd's important book "Collective Imaginings" affirms that quote "Spinoza's accounts of the imagination is not a theory about a faculty, but a theory about a permanent structure through which human beings are constituted as such. The social imaginary is constitutive of, not merely reflective of, the forms of sociability in which we live", end quote. It's surely true that the imagination is ineradicable at least for the kinds of beings, finite thinking modes, that we are. Much of Spinoza's project across all of his works can be understood as an effort to develop a practical orientation toward thought, given the unavoidability and persistent nature of inadequate or imaginary ideas. As Hasana Sharp writes in "Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization", quote: "the task is not to extirpate the imagination. There's many conclusions without premises that populate our minds. But to develop an appreciation of its peculiar character", end quote. But there do seem to be good Spinozist reasons to want to extirpate the imagination even if that goal is ultimately impossible. So, let me just cite a few ideas from the Ethics on this point. In the scholium to proposition 40 of part 2, Spinoza says that we perceive things and form ideas in many ways, knowledge of the first kind includes those ideas formed at random, from sensible experience from signs, based on analogies and habitual associations, he says we can also call this opinion or imagination. And the very next proposition reads knowledge of the first kind is the only cause of falsity. So, I think we've got a bit of a paradox or a problem on our hands, at least. The imagination is ineradicable, it has a peculiar constitutive power, it plays a crucial role in political projects and may perhaps even be essential for concrete movements of liberation. But at the same time, it's also disorderly, random, by definition inadequate, and the only source of falsity.

If we turn to the TTP the first occurrence of the term imagination in the third paragraph of the preface is similarly troubling. Human beings, Spinoza says, are only very rarely rational in their behaviour and quote "they believe that the delirious wanderings of the imagination, dreams and all sorts of childish nonsense, are divine replies", end quote. So, I want to hold on to this tension as I proceed here. I want to suggest that Spinoza is acutely sensitive to this double character of the imagination, that is its ineradicable and constitutive status, and also its destructive... potentially destructive and misleading nature. I think he's deeply disturbed by the stubborn persistence of the imagination and its really effective power to shape social and political reality, and that I think he would like us to submit the imagination to rational criticism as far as is possible. For a sort of contradictory or paradoxical problem perhaps there must be a similarly contradictory response, a kind of striving to minimize the

imagination through critical or rational analysis which can never be finally accomplished but whose impossible achievement is also the horizon of liberation.

So now we can turn to the chapter on miracles. I would... I'm going to argue that it offers an illuminating example of this problematic and that miracles constitute a paradigm case of the kind of imagination that Spinoza would have us destroy using the power of reason if possible. And this I think is because of its relationship to authority, to the production and maintenance of authority. Now it might seem peculiar, Susan James notes, that he would feel the need to return to the topic and dedicate an entire chapter to it, since he had already discussed miracles in the context of prophecy in chapter two. Here Spinoza says, here in chapter six that is, Spinoza says almost nothing specifically political, and he dedicates himself to a purely philosophical critique of the concept of the miraculous, in light of his rigorously immanent metaphysics of divine necessity, which he complements with evidence drawn from scripture. We can state the main claims of the chapter as follows: first, miracles conceived as real interruptions or breaks with the order of nature are metaphysically impossible. Miracles therefore are objects of belief or fictions of the imagination, not real beings. Second if there were miracles this would not be evidence for the existence of God and it would not reveal anything about the divine nature. Rather they would in fact call God's existence and perfection into question. And finally, three, stories from scripture that involve miracles must be interpreted as rhetorical embellishments of phenomena or events that ultimately must have perfectly explicable natural causes.

So, we're gonna look for these ... at these two parts in detail, we're gonna leave the scripture mostly aside, mostly due to time constraints. So, the first claim of the chapter is concerning the metaphysical impossibility of miracles, and so how we have to redefine it. So, there's this demonstration of the metaphysical impossibility of real miracles which simultaneously displaces the miraculous. It belongs properly to the discursive domain of human imagination, to the domain of belief in testimony, or social credibility. His first metaphysical argument here - I think there's two - hinges on the claim that God's will and understanding are identical. Now he had argued for this slightly earlier in chapter four in the divine law: When we say that God understands something, that is the same as saying that God wills it. In the first case of understanding, we're saying that there is an eternal truth that is contained in the divine understanding, or that God has the idea of this thing eternally. In the second case, God's willing something, we're claiming that this eternal truth depends on or is produced by the divine nature. But that's not a real distinction, or for God those are one in the same thing. Spinoza rehearses this argument, quote "by the same necessity by which it follows from the divine nature and perfection that God understands something as it is, it also follows that God wills it as it is. Consequently", Spinoza goes on to say, "the universal laws of nature are simply God's decrees and follow from the necessity and the perfection of the divine nature". So, if then we consider the possibility of miracles taken in the sense of an event that violates the laws of nature, the contradiction becomes apparent. A miracle would be something that is contrary to God's understanding. Or if God performed the miracle by an act of volition, God would contradict God's own nature. This of course is an absurd consequence. Therefore, Spinoza draws the conclusion, quote: "nothing happens in nature that contradicts its universal laws, and nothing occurs which does not conform to those laws or follow from them", end quote. So that's the first of these two arguments hinging on the identity of divine will and understanding.

The second one, the second argument here, has a different structure. The argument is that the idea that there could be something that happens outside of or contrary to the laws of nature presupposes that the power of nature is limited in some way. There would be something, a miracle that nature does not or could not do. But since the power of nature just is the power of God, which expresses the

absolute infinity of the divine essence, that would amount to holding that God's power is somehow limited and that too is unacceptable. So, this double demonstration of the metaphysical impossibility of miracles reframes how we must understand them. As Spinoza says, quote "it most evidently follows that the term miracles can be understood only with respect to human beliefs. And that it means nothing other than a phenomenon whose natural cause cannot be explained on the pattern of some other familiar thing, or at least cannot be so explained by the narrator or the reporter of the miracle". So, the first part of that is important only with respect to human beliefs the miraculous is a category of the imagination. And in so far as it is an object of the first kind of knowledge, it is invariably bound to the necessary contingency of sensible experience, which does not follow the order of reasons. This is also why miracles cannot be repeated. They would lose their surprising, unfamiliar character. And, quote "the common people suppose they have satisfactorily explained something as soon as it no longer astounds them" end quote. Even if they do not actually know the natural laws by which something is produced, if they see its production regularly, the wonder vanishes and it no longer merits the name of miracle. I'm going to return to wonder momentarily. That's the first part of the chapter.

The second part is the argument that we cannot infer the existence or essence of God from miracles. This redefinition of the miraculous as an epistemic category as having a definable sense only in relation to human beliefs is crucial. For their metaphysical impossibility notwithstanding, people do invoke miracles. When they do it is usually for the purpose of arguing that God exists. And most often it is meant to suggest that someone, whether that's the narrator, the audience or Louis XIV is special amongst God's creatures. The miraculous is a figure of providential theology. It belongs to the discourse of election and grace of the chosen one. But Spinoza denies that either the existence or essence of God can be demonstrated on the basis of miracles. And I think there are three arguments to this effect.

So, the first is what I'm going to call the immutability argument. God's existence he says is not known of itself and thus it must be demonstrated. But if such a demonstration is to be beyond doubt, and it wouldn't be much of a demonstration if it didn't, if it's going to be beyond out it would have to be based on common notions or axioms that themselves appear, at least appear to us to be unquestionably true. But that means that they, these common notions or axioms, must be immutable, or at least appear to be so. For if these common notions or axioms were only true at some time and not at others, or if they could cease to be true, then any demonstrations based on them would be suspect or hypothetical at best. But miracles are precisely supposed to be violations of the laws and order of a nature that is otherwise apparently fixed and stable. So not only can miracles not form the basis of an argument for the existence of God, they call into question the very possibility of making any such argument...they ruin the consistency of the sort of common notions that would be necessary in order for such an argument to work.

So, second there's what we could call like the incomprehensibility argument. Suppose Spinoza says that there was something that could not be explained by natural causes. Now understanding something is grasping it through its causes. So, the miraculous is by definition something that quote "surpasses human understanding" and that's the case whether we posit that the miracle has natural causes that we just don't have access to or that it has no natural causes and is caused by directly by God. But so, what can we possibly understand on the basis of something that surpasses human understanding? Things are understood either through themselves or through something else that is understood. So, the basic upshot of this is that a miracle cannot serve as either a major or minor

premise in any possible syllogism. Right, you cannot divide... derive any knowledge on the basis of something that exceeds or surpasses your understanding.

The third argument turns on the absolute infinity of the divine nature that is supposed to be a direct cause of the miraculous event. Even if we could use a miracle as a premise in a deduction it would be, quote "a limited phenomenon and never reveals anything more than a fixed and limited power". So, from such an effect, right, a limited partial particular thing, we could never infer the existence of a cause whose power is infinite. So, in sum, these three arguments all show that God's existence and essence are not demonstrable on the basis of miracles, which seem indeed to undermine the very possibility of coming to know that God exists and what its nature is.

So, for lack of time, I'm going to skip over a lot of the rest of the chapter. In this concluding section I want to briefly draw our attention to two passages which I'm going to put up here:

So first earlier I said that Spinoza says almost nothing political in the chapter on miracles. The exception comes in the very first paragraph where Spinoza lays out the opinions and prejudices of the common people the vulgus concerning miracles. Among these idea among these prejudices is the idea that there are two distinct powers, the power of God and the power of nature, and here we have the quote: "But what they understand by these powers and what they understand by God and nature, they certainly do not know, except that they imagine that the power of God to be like the authority of royal majesty, and the power of nature to be like a force and impetus". So, I think this passage is very important. What is it that the vulgus understands intelligence (intelligence) ... they do not know (nescient)... except that they imagine (imaginentur) that the power of God is like the authority or governance or rule that is a imperium of royal majesty (regie majestatis). The tendency to confuse the power of God with the power of kings is, as Francois Zourabachvili has shown, a recurring motif across Spinoza's whole corpus. This metaphor is extremely misleading. Spinoza is usually most often concerned about one direction of the metaphoric drift. That is, we completely misunderstand God by imagining it to be like a human king. But the metaphor also drifts in the other direction as well: we misunderstand the power of kings by imagining it as divine. Second as I said earlier, miracles follow from and produce a sense of wonder, that is admiratio. This cannot but call to mind the passage from the Appendix to Part one of the Ethics where Spinoza also discusses miracles. He writes, and this is the second quote: "Hence it happens that one who seeks the true causes of miracles, and is eager, like an educated man to understand natural things, not to wonder wander at them like a fool, is generally considered an impious heretic and denounced as such by those whom the people honour as interpreters of nature and the Gods. For they know that if ignorance is taken away, then foolish wonder, the only means they have of arguing and defending their authority, is also taken away." So here again we have the common people, the vulgus who do not understand (intelligere) but who instead are struck with wonder (admirari), a condition of captivation or distraction, by which they're kept in ignorance (ignorancia) which is the only means by which those in power maintain their authority, here auctoritatus.

So, taking this all together I think we can get a really robust sense for what is really at stake in the chapter on miracles. Miracles I've been trying to suggest are a paradigm case of the way in which the theological and political intersect at the point of the imaginary constitution of authority. Miracles are not real but fictions, a highly specific form of imagination that rests on and perpetuates an inadequate metaphor that mystifies both political power and the nature of God. If the imagination is ineradicable in principle and is constitutive in the production of social life, in this chapter Spinoza hones in on this specific kind of imagination, that is very... it's nearly ubiquitous which certainly plays a role in



shaping political reality, and which he does not hesitate to ruthlessly criticize and condemn using as he says, quote "principles known by the natural light of reason". The problem of miracles, I've been trying to suggest, is the problem of credibility granted on the basis of incredible testimony, of human power given the aura of the divine, of the imaginary of wondrous authority. Thank you very much.