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Spinoza: A Baconian in the TTP, but Not in the Ethics?

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Abstract: This paper resolves some puzzles regarding Spinoza's appropriations and rejections of various aspects of Bacon's methodology, and uses these solutions to resolve some long-standing puzzles concerning Spinoza's *modus operandi* in the TTP. We argue first that, appearances to contrary, Spinoza takes a consistent line in his assessment of Bacon's epistemic approach. We argue that Spinoza follows Bacon in grounding his overall epistemic method in a "historiola mentis" (a brief account or history of the mind), and that differences between Spinoza's and Bacon's respective *historiola mentis* can explain Spinoza's embrace of this inductive method for his interpretation of Scripture in the TTP, as well as his general abandonment of Bacon's inductive method in the metaphysical investigation of the Ethics. In short, we argue that the "historiola mentis" constructed by Bacon depicts the intellect as an error-prone faculty that needs be continuously restrained by observation and experimentation—a depiction which motivates Bacon's reformed inductive empiricism. Spinoza accepts this depiction in regard to a subset of the mind's ideas—the ideas of the imagination, and hence sees the inductive method as suitable for interpreting Scripture. But contra Bacon, Spinoza's "historiola mentis" also shows that the human mind includes a subset of ideas that yield true, certain knowledge of things "infinite" and *sub specie aeternitatis*. Spinoza finds these "intellectual" ideas to be quite useful for systematic metaphysics, but of limited use for interpreting historical texts like Scripture.



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1. Two Letters, Two Puzzles

Spinoza's correspondence can leave one puzzled about Spinoza's opinion of Baconian epistemology. In August 1661, Henry Oldenburg asked Spinoza to

... please be good enough to enlighten me on ... what defects you find in the philosophy of Descartes and Bacon, and how you consider that these can be removed and replaced by sounder views. [1] (pp. 761–762)

In his reply Spinoza asserts that Bacon (along with Descartes) makes three mistakes:

The first and most important error is this, that they have gone far astray from knowledge of the first cause and origin of all things. Secondly, they have failed to understand the true nature of the human mind. Thirdly, they have never grasped the true cause of error. Only those who are completely destitute of all learning and scholarship can fail to see the critical importance of true knowledge of these three points ... [1] (p. 762)

In regard to the third mistake, Spinoza adds the following—dismissive—gloss on Bacon:

Of Bacon I shall say little; he speaks very confusedly on this subject [human error], and simply makes assertions while proving hardly anything. In the first place he takes for granted that the human intellect, besides the fallibility of the senses, is by its very nature liable to error, and fashions everything after the analogy of its own nature, and not after the analogy of the universe, so that it is like a

mirror presenting an irregular surface to the rays it receives, mingling its own nature with the nature of reality, and so forth. Secondly, he holds that the human intellect by reason of its peculiar nature, is prone to abstractions, and imagines as stable things that are in flux, and so on. Thirdly, he holds that the human intellect is in constant activity, and cannot come to a halt or rest. Whatever other causes he assigns can all be readily reduced to the one Cartesian principle, that the human will is free and more extensive than the intellect, or, as Verulam more confusedly puts it, the intellect is not characterized as a dry light, but receives infusion from the will. [1] (pp. 762–763)

Given Spinoza's charge that Bacon has (1) "gone far astray from knowledge of the first cause and origin of all things," (2) "failed to understand the true nature of the human mind," and (3) "never grasped the true cause of human error", along with Spinoza's note regarding "the critical importance of true knowledge" of these three points, it seems as if Spinoza has little appreciation for Bacon's philosophical method.

Yet, in his June 1666 letter to Johan Bouwmeester (Ep. 37), Spinoza appears to take a different line. Bouwmeester had questioned Spinoza as to

whether there is, or can be a method such that thereby we can make sure and unwearied progress in the study of things of the highest importance; or whether our thoughts are governed more by fortune than by skill. [1] (p. 861)¹

Spinoza begins his answer by claiming he can show that there must be some such method. He argues that he can demonstrate that our thoughts are not directed merely by "fortune," a term that he equates here with "chance", i.e., "causes which, although acting likewise by definite and fixed laws, are yet unknown to us and foreign to our nature and power," by simply noting that (1) "one clear and distinct perception, or several taken together can be absolutely the cause of another clear and distinct perception." And (2) "that all the clear and distinct perceptions that we form can arise only from other clear and distinct perceptions which are in us, and they acknowledge no other cause outside us" [1] (p. 861). From these two premises, Spinoza claims,

it follows that the clear and distinct perceptions that we form depend only on our nature and its definite and fixed laws, that is, on our power itself alone, and not on chance . . . As for the other perceptions, I do admit that they depend in the highest degree on chance. [1] (p. 861)

It is here, after drawing the contrast between the autonomy of the ideation of clear and distinct ideas and the dependency of our other ideas upon "chance" encounters with unknown "foreign" causes that Spinoza invokes "the manner" of Bacon:

From this it is quite clear what a true method must be and in which it should especially consist, namely, solely in the knowledge of pure intellect and its nature and laws. To acquire this, we must first of all distinguish between intellect and imagination, that is, between true ideas and the others-fictitious, false, doubtful, and, in sum, all ideas, which depend only on memory. To understand these things, at least as far as the method requires, *there is no need to get to know the nature of mind through its first cause; it is enough to formulate a brief account of the mind [historiola mentis] or its perceptions in the manner expounded by Verulam.* [1] (p. 861)

Here, Spinoza takes the Baconian method very seriously. He asserts that to "make sure and unwearied progress in the study of things of the highest importance", we must first grasp the distinction between our true ideas and our fictitious ideas. And to do this, Spinoza claims that we do not need deep metaphysical insight into the origins of the mind, but rather we simply need to formulate a brief account of the mind in the Baconian manner.

¹ This is Spinoza's summary of Bouwmeester's question.

So there is something of a puzzle: How does Spinoza's ringing endorsement of Bacon's epistemic approach in Ep. 37 square with Spinoza's apparent dismissal of Bacon's epistemology in Ep. 2?

It squares rather nicely. In Ep. 2, Spinoza claims that Bacon's (and Descartes) first two errors can "readily be gathered from the truth" of the following three propositions:

First, that in Nature, there cannot exist two substances without their differing entirely in essence; second, that a substance cannot be produced, but that it is of its essence to exist; third, every substance must be infinite, or supremely perfect in its kind [1] (p. 762). Spinoza also claims that these three propositions reveal "the direction of [his own] thought"² [1] (p. 762). They certainly do. These propositions are the fifth, sixth and eighth propositions of the *Ethics* Part I, and it is from these propositions that Spinoza derives the fundamental claims of his philosophical system. In referencing these propositions, Spinoza makes it clear that in accusing Bacon of straying "from the knowledge of the first cause . . . of all things," and failing "to understand the true nature of the human mind" he is charging Bacon with a failure to understand the most fundamental metaphysical principles of Spinoza's thought: namely, that all of Nature is a single entity and that all things, including the human mind, must be understood through this entity.

However, Spinoza explains the third mistake of Bacon (and of Descartes) quite differently. Here, Spinoza claims Bacon and Descartes misunderstood the cause of error because they accepted the "one Cartesian principle, that the human will is free and more extensive than the intellect." Unlike their other errors—which are shown false on account of Spinoza's own metaphysical discoveries—Spinoza claims that Bacon and Descartes should have seen this mistake of theirs, "for themselves"

[T]hey [Descartes and Bacon] would easily have seen this [the falsity of the Cartesian principle] for themselves, had they but given consideration to the fact the will differs from this or that volition in the same way as whiteness differs from this or that white object, or as humanity differs from this or that human. So to conceive the will to be the cause of this or that volition is as impossible as to conceive humanity to be the cause of Peter and Paul. [1] (p. 763)

By emphasizing that Bacon and Descartes, "would easily have seen the falsity of this principle for themselves," Spinoza indicates that the methodologies of Bacon and Descartes are sufficient to uncover this particular error. It is an error that can be grasped without an acceptance of Spinoza's metaphysics: one must simply be able to take notice of the fact that our idea of the will is a confused abstraction of particular volitions³ [2,3].

There are indications in the *Ethics* that Spinoza believes a bit of careful Cartesian introspection is sufficient to reveal this error⁴ [4]. More important for our purposes here, a quick look at Bacon's *Novum Organon* can show why Spinoza would reasonably believe that Bacon's own method should have revealed to Bacon the confused abstract nature of our idea of a free will as well. Consider the sixtieth aphorism of the *Novum Organon*:

The idols that words impose on the intellect are of two kinds. There are either names of things which do not exist . . . or they are names of things which exist, but yet confused and ill-defined, and hastily and irregularly derived from realities . . . But the other class, which springs out of a faulty and unskillful abstraction, is intricate and deeply rooted. Let us take for example such a word as *humid* and see how far the several things which the word is used to signify agree with each

² In reference to these three propositions, Spinoza claims "With these points established, esteemed Sir, provided that the same time you attend to the definition of God, you will readily perceive the direction of my thoughts, so that I need not be more explicit on this subject" [1] (p. 762)

³ Both Bacon (*NO I, XLIX*) [2] (pp. 57–58) and Descartes (*Fourth Meditation*) (pp. 37–43) believe the will is to blame for our errors. Spinoza explicitly confronts this explanation for error because he thinks this sort of account misrepresents the nature of ideation and the mind's relationship with nature.

⁴ See E2P35s: "Men are deceived in that they think themselves free an opinion which consists only in this, they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined . . . They say, of course, that human actions depend on the will, but these are only words for which they have no idea" (p. 473). See also the Preface to E5, where Spinoza criticizes Descartes for violating his commitment to "affirm nothing which he did not perceive clearly and distinctly" in his account of the will's interaction with the body (p. 596).

other, and we shall find the word *humid* to be nothing else than a mark loosely and confusedly applied to denote a variety of actions which will not bear to be reduced to any constant meaning. [2] (pp. 61–62)

Given the obvious parallels between this aphorism’s analysis of the term “humid,” and Spinoza’s analysis of the ideas of “whiteness” and “will” in Ep. 2., it is no stretch for Spinoza to assert that if Bacon had organized his own ideas of his own particular volitions—as Bacon’s method demands⁵—and categorized them before endorsing the usefulness of a general term like “the will,” Bacon would have realized that “the will” refers to a poorly defined mental construct, which cannot explain particular instances of error. Indeed, as Spinoza argues in the demonstration of E2P49, an examination of our particular volitions reveals that none of our volitions can be conceived independently of its object, and so a general term like “the will” is “nothing but a metaphysical being, or universal, which we are used to forming from particulars.” Hence, just as Bacon was able to recognize that a term like “humid” was an “idol” of the mind, because it can only be loosely and confusedly “applied to denote variety of actions Bacon should have seen for himself that “the will”, as Spinoza puts it, “is to this or that volition as “stone-ness” is to this or that stone, or man to Peter or Paul” [4] (p. 483).

So although in Ep. 2, Spinoza is dismissive of Bacon’s *substantive* understanding of metaphysics and the nature of mind, Spinoza does not deny anywhere in this letter that there is epistemic utility in proceeding in the Baconian manner and formulating “a brief account of the mind or its perceptions.” Indeed, in claiming that Bacon could have seen his error for himself, Spinoza acknowledges that Bacon’s natural historical method can yield significant insight⁶ [5]. Spinoza’s endorsement of this Baconian method then, sets the stage for a second interpretive puzzle: What sort of insight does Spinoza believe Bacon’s natural historical method of carefully organizing particular perceptions into general headings can yield?

This puzzle turns out to be quite a bit more important and difficult than our first. In the TTP, Spinoza endorses a method for understanding Scripture that is often noted as having Baconian undertones:

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. [6] (p. 171)

Spinoza’s language here (*historia naturae, historia Scripturae*) makes clear allusion to Baconian thought⁷ [7–12]. As we argue below, in the TTP, Spinoza makes careful use of Bacon’s method of interpreting nature as a method for interpreting Scripture. But it cannot be said that in doing this, Spinoza simply *follows* Bacon. For one, Bacon argues that his method of interpreting nature should *not* be employed in the study of Scripture! And

⁵ We will say much more of Bacon’s method in Section 2.

⁶ Aaron Garrett discusses the apparently contradictory assessments of these letters as well. Garrett, however, resolves the apparent contradiction by asserting that in Ep. 37, Spinoza claims that, “in its broad lines Bacon’s account of the human mind, and method is compatible with his own,” while in Ep. 2, Spinoza was not rejecting “this or that thing that Bacon said,” but was “instead . . . claiming that Bacon had no understanding of the way in which the human mind was related to first principles and thus fell into errors such as arguing for the existence of a faculty of will distinct from intellect” [5] (pp. 78–79). In contrast, we have argued here that the apparent contradiction between the letters is resolved by distinguishing Bacon’s method of beginning inquiry with a brief examination of the mind’s perceptions—a method Spinoza endorses, and the claims about the mind that Bacon reaches through his method—claims that Spinoza rejects.

⁷ That this is Baconian has been noted by Zac (pp. 29–36), Donagan [8] (pp. 16–17), Preuss [9] (pp. 161–167), Rosenthal [10] (pp. 113–115), Fraenkel [11] (p. 46). Bacon, it is well known, developed the most elaborate and influential theory of natural history. He discusses natural history in his *Advancement of Learning, Novum Organum, Historia naturalis et experimentalis, De Augmentis Scientiarum, Descriptio globi intellectualis* and *Phaenomena universi*. He also presented various examples of natural histories, including, for instance, *Historia vitae et mortis* and *Sylva sylvarum*. For an excellent discussion of the scope of Baconian natural history, its novelty, and its distinctiveness in relation to traditional Renaissance natural history, see Anstey [12].

second, despite Spinoza's assertion in the TTP that the method of interpreting scripture is the same as the method for interpreting nature, in Spinoza's own investigation into the most general features of Nature, Spinoza does not follow this method! In Part One of the *Ethics* at least, Spinoza's account of God or Nature does not involve any construction of a *history of nature*, nor indeed any inductive inferences at all. So why does Spinoza believe that Bacon's inductive method is suitable for grounding an interpretation of Scripture in the TTP, but unsuitable for the metaphysical account God or Nature presented in the *Ethics*?

Our central question then, concerning the sort of insight that Spinoza believes the Baconian method can yield, is a significant one. Spinoza sees Bacon's natural historical method of carefully organizing particular perceptions (or certain data) into general headings as sufficient for securing "a method such that thereby we can make sure and unwearied progress in the study of things of the highest importance," and sufficient for interpreting the meaning of Scripture. Yet, in his development of the foundational metaphysics of "God or Nature" within his *Ethics*, Spinoza employs the geometric method in place of a Baconian one.

2. How Exactly Is Spinoza a Baconian in the TTP?

2.1. Spinoza on Biblical Hermeneutics

According to Bacon, the interpretation of nature is composed of two principal phases: first, it ascends gradually from experience systematically arranged and tabulated to general axioms; secondly, it descends from these axioms to less general particulars. The *Novum Organum*, a work Spinoza knew well⁸, formulates this general scheme as follows: "the true method" commences "with experience duly ordered and digested, not bungling or erratic, and from it educing axioms, and from established axioms again new experiments" [2] (p. 81)⁹ [13]. Spinoza follows this Baconian *modus operandi* in his approach to the interpretation of Scripture: "the first thing to be sought from the history of Scripture is what is most universal" and "once we rightly know this universal teaching of Scripture, we must next proceed to other, less universal things" [6] (p. 176).

Now, it might be thought that there is an obvious difference between the method of the TTP and the *Novum Organon*. Spinoza appears to be pushing us immediately towards the derivation of what is most universal, whereas Bacon emphasizes the need to make gradual *intermediate* inductions [2] (p. 97). There is however, no such disagreement. In the TTP, "what is most universal" in Scripture is not to be derived from universal axioms brought to bear upon one's interpretation of Scripture, rather, "what is most universal" are general principles of Scripture discovered from the history of Scripture itself, which are then to be used to make sense of more particular things. In this, Spinoza is in complete agreement with Bacon. As *Novum Organon* states "... [T]he larger and more universal agreements of things are not wholly obscure. And so we must begin from them" [14] (p. 216).

A deeper look into the method of Bacon and the interpretive method of the TTP reveals more substantial structural similarities. Consider Bacon's expansive formulation of the scheme of the *Novum Organum*:

My directions for the interpretation of nature embrace two generic divisions; the one how to educe and form axioms from experience, the other how to deduce and arrive new experiments from axioms. The former again is divided into three ministrations; a ministration to the sense, a ministration to the memory, and a ministration to the mind or reason. [2] (p. 127)

⁸ In a letter to Oldenburg [1] (pp. 762–763), Spinoza cites various passages from the *Novum Organum*, indicating his familiarity with the work. Spinoza, as we know, not only had access to *Novum Organum*, his library contained a copy of *Sermones Fideles, Ethici, Politici, æconomici: Sive Interiora Rerum. Accedit Faber Fortunæ &c.*, a 1641 Latin Edition of Bacon's *Essays* (1625). This edition included material from Book VIII of *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623). Although we lack explicit evidence to confirm his familiarity with *De Augmentis* as a whole, it would be unlikely for Spinoza not to have consulted the rest of Bacon's magnum opus.

⁹ In *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, Bacon writes: "all true and fruitful Natural Philosophy has a double scale or ladder, ascendant and descendent, ascending from experiments to axioms, and descending from axioms to the investigation of new experiments" [13] (p. 343).

According to Bacon, the educement and formation of axioms proceeds through three progressive stages. First, there is a ministration of the sense, i.e., a preparation of a “natural and experimental history” which serves to lay the foundation of the entire enterprise. The interpreter collects into a “history” all known instances of the nature that is to be investigated. Second, there is a ministration to the memory, i.e., a construction of ‘Tables and Arrangements of Instances,’ which organizes and supplements the collected data into clear easy to grasp arrangement. Third, there is a ministration to the mind, i.e., the application of “true and legitimate induction, which is the very key of interpretation” [2] (p. 127). Here, the interpreter eliminates extraneous and dubious material from the history and corrects for contradictory or irreproducible experiences found within the tables and rejects testimony and observations that do not correctly exemplify or indicate the essence of the object of study.

Spinoza’s guidelines in the TTP for the construction and the use of a history of Scripture show a remarkable resemblance to this Baconian procedure. First, the interpreter of Scripture is to collect all the data available that will enable her to construct, as far as possible, a history of Scripture. She is to gather all the sayings of each book, taking into account the nature and properties of the original language, as well as the specific historical circumstances of each book¹⁰. This careful gathering of “scriptural data” corresponds to Bacon’s first step of carefully collecting experiences for further organization and tabulation. It is Spinoza’s version of Bacon’s *ministration of the sense*.

Second, the exegete must “organize (the sayings) under main headings so that we can readily find all those concerning the same subject” [2] (p. 173). She is to construct a subject index that will facilitate the act of interpreting. The exegete gathers all the sayings from the prophet or topic under exploration, and categorizes them by the content they are concerned with. This categorization step corresponds with Bacon’s second methodological step. It is Spinoza’s version of *a ministration to the memory*.

Third, the exegete is to compose a list of seemingly inconsistent utterances of one and the same prophet and subsequently determine—as far as possible—the prophet’s true opinion regarding the matter at hand” [2] (p. 173). This is Spinoza’s version of Bacon’s *ministration to the mind*. The exegete is to attend primarily to the literal meaning of utterances. But problems arise when there is an obvious conflict between multiple utterances taken by their literal meaning. As Spinoza notes, although Moses said that ‘God is a fire’, he also clearly taught that, “God has no likeness to any visible things in the heavens, on the earth, or in the sea” [2] (p. 174).

As well noted, according to Spinoza the only way to resolve this tension is to interpret one of the contrary statements metaphorically. However, a metaphorical reading is only allowed when there are linguistic reasons internal to the text that permit a deviation of the literal meaning [2] (p. 174). And here, the already constructed table of utterances comes in handy. Because the term *fire* is also taken for anger and jealousy in *Job* 31:12, and since Moses on several occasions teaches that God is jealous, and nowhere claims that God lacks passions, the text itself allows us to interpret ‘God is fire’ as ‘God is jealous’ [2] (pp. 174–175). In situations where linguistic usage within the text does not illuminate the meaning of problematic sayings, the interpreter suspends judgment and accepts the inexplicability of the utterances under scrutiny. At this stage, obscure utterances are set aside and the interpreter remains with ‘interpretable’ passages.

For both Bacon and Spinoza then, the natural historical method—the careful gathering of a large body of data, the organization of this data into a clear and assessable fashion,

¹⁰ Spinoza’s history of a Scripture takes into account (i) the nature and properties of the language in which it was written [6] (p. 173), as well as (ii) the specific historical circumstances of each book, i.e., the life, character and concerns of its author, its intended audience). This, Spinoza emphasizes, includes (iii) the reception of the work and the way it came to be accepted in the canon [2] (p. 175).

and the parsing out of the dubious and incomprehensible bits of data¹¹ [15–18]—serves to keep the conclusions of the would be interpreter carefully constrained by the object of interpretation, and not left to the biases and opinions of the interpreter. As Bacon puts it, to correctly interpret nature, “we do not need to give men’s understanding wings, but rather lead and weights, to check every leap and flight” [14] (p. 83). And as Spinoza puts it, we must not “twist the meaning of Scripture according to the dictates of our own reason and according to our own preconceived opinions. The whole knowledge of the Bible, must come from the Bible alone” [6] (p. 175).

Put into the context of a Baconian *history*, Spinoza’s reliance on the Protestant hermeneutical principles *sola scriptura* (‘Scripture alone’) and *scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (‘Scripture interprets itself’)¹² [18] generates rather unorthodox conclusions about the intelligibility of various parts of the text. Spinoza notes that the occasions where one can actually rely on other passages to illuminate obscure utterances and teachings are limited¹³ [19,20]. Our incomplete knowledge of Scripture’s original language and the circumstances regarding the authorship and reception of the books prevent us in most cases from grasping the true meaning of an obscure passage. That being said, Spinoza holds that there is no problem whatsoever in determining the universal teaching of Scripture for according to Spinoza the whole of Scripture all tends towards the same teaching: “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.” The Bible “teaches these and similar things everywhere, so clearly and so explicitly that there has never been anyone who disputed the meaning of Scripture concerning these things” [6] (p. 176).

For Spinoza, our ability to assess the teachings of Scripture as either clear or obscure ultimately depends on our ability to construct objective histories of certain parts of the text. There are, strictly speaking, no inherently obscure parts in Scripture. The fact that there are many things in Scripture that our reason cannot speak to, or to use Spinoza’s words, that exceed “the limits of our intellect” (*limites nostri intellectus excedunt*) [6] (p. 78) is due only to the limited context in which we interpret¹⁴ [21]. Spinoza’s message is clear: “the difficulties of interpreting Scripture have not arisen from a defect in the powers of the natural light, but only from the negligence (not to say wickedness) of the men who were indifferent to the history of Scripture while they could still construct it” [6] (p. 186; see also p. 186 and p. 192).

This latter position of Spinoza is in radical opposition to a fundamental principle of reformed theology, namely, that human beings can only fully access the spiritual truths of Scripture through divine illumination, and not through mere rational contemplation. Calvin, for instance, states, “we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit” [22] (p. 78). Although reformers like Luther and Calvin did not fully reject reason in matters of exegesis, they maintained that only the internal witness of the Holy Spirit can provide the infallible certainty that Scripture is the Word of God [23] (p. 98). Indeed, Spinoza’s denial of a more perfect conviction than that offered by the natural light, shows a deep

¹¹ We should keep in mind that what counts as a Baconian natural history is not entirely clear. *Sylva Sylvarum* and the *History of Winds*, for instance, have significant differences in composition and in goals. Based on this fact alone, plus the many divergent comments Bacon makes about natural history, what a Baconian natural history looks like remains controversial. Moreover, scholarship has shown that the method of the *Interpretation of Nature*—which involves induction—and the method of natural history are different (e.g., Jardine [15]). Indeed, natural histories—collections of facts about particular natural objects, species, or qualities—precede Baconian induction: the former merely provide ‘the primary material of philosophy and the stuff and subject matter of true induction’ [16] (p. 254); see e.g. also Anstey [17]. We argue that what Spinoza took Baconian natural history to be all about is precisely the process of gathering amounts of observational data, the careful organization of this data, and the elimination of dubious and incomprehensible bits of data. This conforms both to Spinoza’s construction of a history of Scripture in the TTP, and to his appropriation of a Baconian ‘history of the mind’ (*historiola mentis*) in the TIE and elsewhere.

¹² Luther famously defended the self-interpreting nature of Scripture. See, e.g., Mostert [18].

¹³ For a discussion of Spinoza’s TTP within the particular context of Dutch Calvinist Orthodoxy, see James [19] (pp. 37–43, 139–160) and Grafton [20].

¹⁴ Harris formulates this as follows: “*Rebus nostri intellectus excedentibus*, concerning which we must consult the Scriptures, are such things as we cannot deduce from first principles because they are either historical or such as lie beyond the scientific and empirical evidence at our disposal” [21] (p. 137).

philosophical break with much of 17th-century theology¹⁵ [24,25] (as well as some notable contemporary theology)¹⁶ [26]. It also shows a significant break with the thought of Bacon. According to Bacon, the core articles of faith are unamenable to reason, so we can only “derive and deduce inferences from them according to their analogy” [27] (p. 114). Bacon’s view is that theologians should be aware not to attach the same authority to inferences as to the first principles of Scripture revealed by God himself. To illuminate this, Bacon makes a comparison between the study of religion and the study of nature. In natural philosophy, we formulate first principles through the process of induction. The validity of these principles does not rest on authority, it is reason—applied to experience—that makes them indisputable. Moreover, since these first principles have no discordance with reason, we can rationally deduce middle propositions from these first principles that will have the same level of epistemological certainty. But according to Bacon, this is not the case in religion. Throughout *De Augmentis*, Bacon affirms the divine origin and transcendent nature of Scripture’s core teachings and this has implications regarding the role of reason.

Those who enter into the ship of the church “shall step out of the bark of human reason.” The stars of philosophy no “longer supply their light.” [27] (p. 111)

Sacred theology “ought to be derived from the word and oracles of God, and not from the light of nature, or the dictates of reason” [27] (p. 112)

In religion then, the absolute certainty of first principles is not a matter of applied reasoning, but a matter of divine authority alone. Consequently, the rules of induction do not apply. The various doctrines and tenets formulated on the basis of these indisputable *mysteries and first principles* are merely probable and always open for disputation [27] (p. 115)¹⁷. [28,29]

In the TTP, Spinoza also famously claims that religion is a matter of obedience and not a matter of philosophical understanding [6] (p. 268). Yet, unlike Bacon, Spinoza’s distinction between religion and philosophy is not rooted in the belief that human understanding is incapable of grasping the highest of theological/metaphysical truths. Spinoza has full confidence that no supernatural light is needed to grasp the highest insights of theology [6] (p. 186). For Spinoza then, understanding Scripture is no different than understanding any other product of God’s power.

We shall argue below that Spinoza’s insistence that there is no higher certainty than that afforded by the natural light is rooted in a *historiala mentis* that Spinoza himself constructs in the manner of Bacon. That is, we claim that at the end of Spinoza’s *TIE*, Spinoza enumerates the various activities of the mind, and, that by examining the differences between this *historia mentis* and the account of the mind that Bacon presents in the *Novum Organon*, we can explain why Spinoza, in contrast to Bacon, concludes there is a sub-section of our mind (the intellect) that is capable of constructing, with perfect certainty, a set of the-

¹⁵ Many 17th-century conservative theologians defended the idea that the Holy Spirit has to illumine before one can have true understanding of the Scriptural content. For example, in his *Disputatio Theologica de iudice et norma fidei* (June 1668), Dutch theologian Gysbertus Voetius argued that “the Holy Spirit is the highest, absolute, infallible judge and interpreter of Scripture.” Similar to Luther and Calvin, Voetius never fully excluded reason from matters of biblical exegesis. However, its role was merely instrumental; in the end, the Holy Spirit is needed to access the true meaning of Scripture [24] (pp. 49–52). The notion of supernatural illumination also circulated among the Dutch Cartesians. Johannes de Raey, the unofficial leader of the group, defended the idea that certain people have a privileged access to the Scriptural content because of a supernatural light. In his *Clavis*, he writes that: “God has wished some to have knowledge concerning himself, or his will and counsel, or his works revealed in Scripture, by a special and private grace, and has thus illuminated their minds. And because philosophers have no greater capacity to partake of this illumination than any ordinary person, anybody possessing such knowledge must be said to have drawn it not from human faculties, and not thereby from philosophy, but only to have accepted it from divine grace” [25] (p. 117).

¹⁶ See, for example, Plantinga, for whom the interpretation of biblical text through the activity of the Spirit in the individual remains authoritative. He, e.g., notes that “the fact that it is God who is the principal author here makes it quite possible that we are to learn from the text in question is something rather different from what the human author proposed to teach” [26] (p. 385).

¹⁷ Although Bacon affirms the power of the natural light in assisting with *some* matters of divinity—“that God exists, that he governs the world, that he is supremely powerful, that he is wise and prescient, that he is good, the he is a rewarder, that he is an avenger, that he is an object of adoration—all this may be demonstrated by his works alone” [13] (p. 341)—*the contemplation of nature cannot according to Bacon tell us anything about God’s inmost nature*. Those who seek a fuller knowledge of the deity, must resort to Scripture, since it is there rather than in nature that God reveals his will. For Bacon, only revealed theology can provide positive knowledge of God and serve as the foundation of faith [27] (p. 111); see also Gascoigne [28] (p. 216) and Milner [29] (p. 259).

ological/metaphysical deductions¹⁸. We argue that the results of Spinoza's *historiola mentis* explains Spinoza's use of the geometric method in the *Ethics*, and his use of Bacon's inductive method in the TTP. Before doing so, though, we wish to draw out some additional, important, implications of Spinoza's Baconian approach to the reading of Scripture.

2.2. The TTP on Supernatural Illumination and Miracles

Although commentators have rightly noted that Spinoza construes his exegetical method in analogy with Bacon's 'natural history', the full extent of Bacon's role has not yet been determined. This section shows that Spinoza's application of the Baconian *ars historica* to Scripture also provides the framework from which to approach some of the most puzzling questions that arise in the context of Spinoza's views on the interpretation of Scripture. Specifically, we argue that both Spinoza's radical rejection in the TTP of all appeals to supernatural inspiration, and his notorious revision of biblical miracles—as having natural rather than supernatural causal explanations—are best understood in light of Bacon's discussion of ancient historical texts and the difficulties related to their transmission and interpretation. That is, Spinoza motivates his rejection of both principles in light of the biased and corrupted transmission and reception of biblical texts. Both principles are presented as theological fabrications falsely introduced throughout the ages; the product of "negligence not to say wickedness of those men who were indifferent to the History of Scripture" [6] (p. 186). We argue that Spinoza, by doing so, reformulates a worry already advanced by Bacon in *De Augmentis*—namely, that our reading and understanding of historical documents is often biased as a consequence of the operation of historical forces on their preservation and diffusion¹⁹ [30].

In the TTP, Spinoza casts theology's traditional understanding of (1) supernatural illumination—as a necessary requisite for a true understanding of Scripture—and (2) miracles—as interruptions or contraventions of the order of nature—into the ash heap of intellectual rubbish that has permitted the misconstruing of Scripture's core moral message. Our understanding of the Bible, Spinoza tells us, does not rely on any supernatural light: "the standard of interpretation must be nothing but the natural light common to all" [6] (p. 191). The text, when properly interpreted, ascribes natural causes even to those events it presents as miracles: "nowhere does [Scripture] teach that anything happens in nature which is contrary to its laws, or which cannot follow from them. So these things ought not to be fictitiously ascribed to Scripture" [6] (p. 168).

A number of commentators have remarked that Spinoza's *modus operandi* introduces a significant tension in the TTP (e.g., Zac [7] (p. 206); Preuss [9] (pp. 197–201)). Criteria of rationality, in clear breach with Spinoza's own prescriptions for interpreting the Bible, seem to dictate his rejection of these doctrines. Put differently, Spinoza's allegiance to naturalism appears to contaminate his reading of Scripture. *Pace* such readings, we argue that Spinoza's dismissal of (1) and (2) follows logically from his treatment of the Bible as a product of civil history, i.e., a work of human industry fully subject to historical manipulation and corruption. Spinoza does not violate his own critique of rationalist or 'dogmatic' theories of biblical hermeneutics according to which biblical writings are interpreted so as to make them consistent with reason. Rather, he spells out the consequences of a historical approach to Scripture, the primary intention of which is to discover the 'mind of Scripture's authors'

¹⁸ It is worth noting that by "intellect," Spinoza does not mean to pick out a faculty of the mind. Rather, he is picking out the productive ideation of the clear and distinct ideas that comprise a portion of the bundle of ideas that make up a human mind.

¹⁹ Bacon, admittedly, would not be the first to alert the reader to the insidious role played by language, representation and the transmission of knowledge. Tacitus and Lipsius, two authors greatly admired by Verulam himself, already put forward a view of human history dominated by imagined and fabricated accounts of reality, exposing 'feigned history' and make-believe representations as ubiquitous devices for the maintenance of power (see especially Giglioni [30]). Spinoza, who in all likelihood was familiar with their work, could have drawn from a wider tradition. However, Spinoza had good reasons for calling attention to Bacon's particular treatment of these matters. Key here is Bacon's hesitancy, throughout his writings, to unconditionally apply his reflections regarding the 'critical and pedagogical' complexities related to the transmission of knowledge to the Bible. Bacon, at least openly, never extended its application to Scripture. His writings, however, simultaneously express a critical awareness of what such an application would entail for an adequate understanding of church history. Bacon's program as such provided Spinoza with an ideal starting point for a reading of Scripture *fully* grounded in natural-historical reasoning.

(*mentes auctorum scripturae*). This latter category, however, must be broadly interpreted: scribal errors and intentional changes during the history of textual transmission are taken into account. In short: by integrating Scripture within the canon of civil history—extending Bacon’s reflections regarding the biased transmission of knowledge to the Bible itself—Spinoza is capable of providing a theological rationale for the rejection of (1) and (2); a rejection fully grounded in a hermeneutics that admits “no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing it than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history” [6] (p. 171).

Spinoza’s reliance on a ‘Baconian’ approach to the study of Scripture ultimately reveals a discontentment with Verulam’s own treatment of the Bible. According to *De Augmentis*, the Bible should never be treated like just any other historical document; a natural-historical inquiry cannot be performed in light of the divine origin and transcendent nature of Scripture’s core principles. For Bacon, reason, in matters of interpretation, can only take us so far; it is crucial that the reader of Scripture depend on ‘divine illumination’ and ‘inspiration’ to acquire a true understanding of the text. So, Spinoza’s application of Bacon’s method for interpreting nature to Scripture is really quite remarkable. Spinoza applies the Baconian natural historical method to a field of enquiry from which Bacon explicitly excludes it²⁰ [31].

It should be noted that for Bacon, a crucial source of material for the improvement of both morality, i.e., the ‘Philosophy of Humanity’ which considers man ‘segregate’, and policy, i.e., ‘Civil Philosophy’ which considers man ‘congregate and in society’, is civil history (see e.g., Wormald [32] (p. 77); Manzo [33] (pp. 37). Although civil history does not offer a strict metaphysical account of the affects and the processes involved, the knowledge contained in it still provides a vivid and captivating observation to the state of the human condition. Bacon writes that “men taste well knowledges that are drenched in flesh and blood, civil history, morality, policy, about which men’s affections, praises, fortunes do turn and are conversant” [34] (p. 383). Specifically, for Bacon, civil history harbors an inexhaustible wealth of information regarding the “characters, affections, and perturbations” of the human mind. He singles out a wiser sort of historians, poets, and prophets as supreme doctors of this knowledge; they captivate the intricate workings of the mind and reveal the way in which passionate processes manifests themselves through space and time. In sum, for Bacon, an acquaintance with civil history is particularly useful since it reveals—in an especially captivating manner—the persistency and diversity of human passionate behavior.

In all this, Spinoza concurs with Bacon [35]. What makes Spinoza different from Bacon, however, is that he unequivocally includes the Bible itself within the canon of civil history. He writes:

reading them [viz. the historical narratives of Scripture] is very useful in relation to civil life. For the more we have observed and the better we know the customs and characters of men—which can best be known from their actions—the more cautiously we will be able to live among them and the better we will be able to accommodate our actions and lives to their mentality. [6] (p. 130)

Spinoza thus explicitly attributes to Scripture the same value commonly assigned by Bacon to civil history. The Bible, like any other instance of civil history, is an excellent source of behavioral knowledge. It too offers a detailed description of men’s characters, deeds, vices, and intentions as revealed by their interaction with specific personalities and

²⁰ However, a careful and critical reading of *De Augmentis* simultaneously reveals Bacon’s willingness to increasingly apply secular reasoning to matters of the Church. Moreover, if we also take into account Bacon’s activities in the *Essays*, the *New Atlantis*, *Sylva Sylvarum*, and the *Novum Organum*, we see that Verulam came remarkably close to formulating a naturalized account of various aspects of the religious phenomena. Bacon not only suggests naturalistic explanations of miracles, he goes so far as to reduce religious idolatry and superstition to the mere workings of the imagination. So while Bacon himself never performed a fully fleshed-out natural history of religion, his writings mark an important, even groundbreaking point of departure for further inquiry. However, this detailed discussion lies beyond the scope of this present chapter. For a detailed account, see Van Cauter [31] (pp. 74–90).

events, descriptions that allow the reader to infer from the reported facts their own moral and political observations.

Spinoza's rejection of all appeals to a supernatural light in matters of exegesis follows directly from his treatment of the Bible as a product of civil history. Spinoza emphasizes that in order to arrive at a sufficient understanding of Scripture—a human artefact produced through a complex history of writing, editing, and canonization—interpreters need to recognize and take into account the process of transmission and editing of the text, as well as the intentions and biases of the authors involved. The outcome of this approach is revealing: Spinoza rejects theology's reliance on inspiration as a necessary requisite for a true understanding of Scripture as mere opportunities for priestcraft; the product of "negligence not to say wickedness of those men who were indifferent to the history of Scripture" [6] (p. 186).

Spinoza, we can surmise, would arguably not include Bacon within the category of theologians responsible for this detrimental state of affairs. The point, however, remains: by integrating Scripture within the canon of civil history—identifying it as a product of human industry subject to historical manipulation and corruption—Spinoza presents a reading of Scripture capable of dismissing all appeals to supernatural illumination.

Spinoza's integration of Scripture within the canon of civil history also entails significant consequences for our understanding of miracles as related in Scripture. By a similar line of reasoning it is shown that the common understanding of miracles—as interruptions or contraventions of the order of nature—too finds little biblical support. Spinoza claims that "nowhere does [Scripture] teach that anything happens in nature which is contrary to its laws, or which cannot follow from them. So these things ought not to be fictitiously ascribed to Scripture" [6] (p. 168). The TTP does not stop here. Spinoza adds that "if anything should be found [in Scripture] which can be conclusively demonstrated to be contrary to the laws of nature, or to have been unable to follow from them, we must believe without reservation that it has been added to the Sacred Texts by sacrilegious men" [6] (p. 163). This, as Nadler rightly points out, is remarkable:

Given everything Spinoza has said about the authors of Scripture—who, to repeat, were not learned philosophers, much less Spinozists—why should we believe that they *could not* teach a superstitious account of miracles, that any such message would have to have been inserted by an impious and sacrilegious forger? [36] (p. 638)

Confronted with this interpretive puzzle, Nadler introduces a helpful distinction between (1) the phenomenon as experienced by the biblical author, (2) the interpretation of this phenomenon by the author, and (3) the true cause of the phenomenon. When Spinoza writes that nothing can be found in Scripture "which can be conclusively demonstrated to be contrary to the laws of nature" [6] (p. 163), this should not imply that we will never find interpretations in the Bible that attribute to events supernatural causes. Rather, what Spinoza has in mind is that these interpretations "are always a function of the beliefs and preconceptions of the author" [36] (p. 640). Indeed, many of the biblical authors undoubtedly were convinced of the supernatural character of events. What Spinoza's assertion does imply, Nadler continues, is that "in Scripture we will never find the narration of something occurring in an individual's experience for which there is not, in fact, a natural explanation" [36] (p. 641). According to Nadler, this interpretation, however, does not solve all difficulties. He concludes by remarking that it is still a 'mystery' why Spinoza believes "that as a matter of fact Scripture itself—or, rather, its prophetic authors—when properly interpreted does in fact ascribe natural causes to all events, even those it presents as miracles" [36] (p. 642).

Spinoza's remarkable claim becomes less enigmatic when explained in reference to his treatment of the Bible as a product of civil history. Spinoza spells out the consequences of a historical approach to Scripture whose primary intention is to discover the 'mind of

Scripture's authors' (*mentem auctorum scripturae*)²¹. This latter category must be broadly interpreted: scribal errors and intentional changes during the history of textual transmission are taken into account. Consider the following statement:

So partly because of religion and partly because of preconceived opinions they conceived and recounted the affair far differently than it really could have happened. Therefore, to interpret the miracles in Scripture and to understand from the narrations of them how they really happened, we need to know the opinions of those who first narrated them, and those who left them to us in writing, and to distinguish those opinions from what the senses could have represented to them. Otherwise we'll confuse their opinions and judgments with the miracle itself, as it really happened. [6] (p. 165)

Spinoza tells us that some of the authors attributed supernatural causes to natural events because of ignorance²², while others retained supernatural language only to instill devotion in their audience. This latter point should not surprise us: "the purpose of Scripture is not to teach things through their natural causes, but only to relate those things which fill the imagination, and to do this by that Method and style which serves best to increase wonder at things." [6] (p. 162). For Spinoza, the issue is rather that the long interpretive process in the transmission of biblical texts no longer allows us to properly differentiate between the opinions of the 'original' authors—viz. the subjective experience of the prophets, apostles and other protagonists—and the opinions of those involved in the complex process of transmission. Spinoza writes:

It is quite rare for men to relate a thing simply, just as it happened, without mixing any of their own Judgment into the narration. Indeed, when they see or hear something new, unless they take great precautions against their preconceived opinions, they will, for the most part, be so preoccupied with them that they will perceive something completely different from what they see or hear has happened, particularly if the thing which has been done surpasses the grasp of the narrator or the audience, and especially if it makes a difference to his affairs that the thing should happen in a certain way. That's why in their Chronicles and histories men relate their own opinions more than the events they're reporting, and why two men who have different opinions relate one and the same event so differently that they seem to be speaking about two events, and finally, why it is often not very difficult to find out the opinions of the Chronicler and historian just from their histories. If I did not think it would be superfluous, I could cite many examples to confirm this, both from Philosophers who have written the history of nature, and from Chroniclers. [6] (p. 164)

In our study of the Bible, all interpretative difficulties commonly associated with the study of historical texts must be taken into account. That is, difficulties which relate to words, discourse, and the transmission of knowledge apply as much to the Bible as to any other chronicle or historical document. Spinoza's point is ingenious: the awareness that our knowledge of historical texts is always shaped by the transmissive means through which it is developed, organized, and passed on is a Baconian theme par excellence, as will be shown next.

Chapter IV of Book VI of *De Augmentis* deals specifically with the 'critical and pedagogical' complexities related to the transmission of knowledge and the reading of books. Bacon warns his readers that "the most corrected copies are often the least correct". We

²¹ Recall TTP 7.7–8: "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—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." [6] (p. 171).

²² See TTP 6.56: "It's important to know their opinions not only for these purposes, but also so that we do not confuse the things which really happened with imaginary things, which were only Prophetic representations. For many things are related in Scripture as real, and were even believed to be real, which were, nevertheless, only representations and imaginary things." [6] (p. 165).

read and study books through the lenses of teachers and traditions, yet the work of editors, annotators, commentators, and interpreters often results in a corruption of the original message: “the rash diligence of some has done no little harm” [13] (p. 491). While it would lead us astray to fully confront Bacon’s reflections dealing with the transmission of knowledge, one consideration deserves particular attention. Confronted with the fact that most editors and annotators of texts conflate their own opinions with those of the original authors, Bacon makes the following suggestion: “it were especially to be desired . . . that every writer who handles arguments of the obscurer and more important kind, should himself subjoin his own explanations; that so the text may not be interrupted by digressions and expositions, and the notes be not at variance with the writers’ meaning [13] (p. 494).

In sum, in the TTP, Spinoza reformulates the very same worry advanced by Bacon in *De Augmentis*: our reading and understanding of historical documents are often biased as a consequence of the operation of historical forces on their preservation and diffusion. Bacon, as we should expect by now, is careful enough not to include the Bible into his considerations: he illustrates his points using a passage from Tacitus’ *Historiae*. Spinoza, by contrast, unambiguously applies the same line of thought to Scripture. For him, the Bible forms an integral part of the canon of civil history; the same methodological considerations apply.

Commentators have remarked that the above mentioned passages—those where Spinoza argues that biblical narrations of supernatural events, when properly interpreted, in fact always presuppose natural causes—present troubling questions regarding Spinoza’s views in the TTP on the interpretation of Scripture. The goal of Spinoza’s method of exegesis was to avoid twisting “the meaning of Scripture according to the dictates of our own reason and according to our own preconceived opinions” [6] (p. 175). Spinoza’s own metaphysics—viz. the idea that it is impossible for anything to happen that is contrary to or above Nature—nonetheless seems to influence his reading of the lessons of Scripture. This might indeed be the case. However, commentators tend to ignore Spinoza’s own awareness of the tensions involved. Spinoza, nearing the end of Chapter 6, adds specifically that his discussion of miracles proceeded “according to a method completely different” from the one followed elsewhere in the TTP [6] (p. 167). The majority of Spinoza’s discussion of miracles in Chapter 6 centers around a purely philosophical argument in favor of the overall conclusion that all events related in Scripture, including miracles, must have happened according to the common order of nature. Spinoza, however, is fully aware that his *modus operandi* conflicts with his own prescriptions for interpreting the Bible: when he notes “I’ve elicited the main points only from principles known to the natural light. I did this deliberately” [6] (p. 167). To silence his critics, he goes on to show that his conclusion can equally be upheld using a methodological procedure that admits no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history. In sum, Spinoza in Chapter 6 of the TTP shows that his conclusion can be defended using two very different methodological procedures: either through the construction of a history of miracles—an approach that emphasizes the various complexities related to the transmission of knowledge—or through the use of philosophical arguments.

Regardless of whether one finds Spinoza’s response satisfactory, his procedure is both witty and well conceived. Let us briefly consider Spinoza’s proposed philosophical argument. In a nutshell: Spinoza argues that miracles do not provide insight into “God’s essence, nor his existence, nor his providence, but that on the contrary these things are better perceived from the fixed and immutable order of nature”. Miracles do not show us the existence of God, to the contrary, “they would make us doubt his existence” [6] (p. 156). Belief in miracles, Spinoza continues, “would make us doubt everything and would lead to Atheism” [6] (p. 159). Spinoza’s philosophical claim is a clear reformulation of an argument advanced by Bacon throughout his various writings. Consider the following well-known passage from ‘Of Atheism’:

God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because his ordinary works convince it. It is true that a little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men’s minds about the religion. For while the

mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further, but when it beheld the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity. [37] (p. 371)

A similar line of thought is found in *Novum Organum*:

But if we take the matter rightly, natural philosophy after the Word of God is the best medicine for superstition and most highly recommended food for faith. And so to religion natural philosophy is rightly given as her most faithful servant, the former manifesting God's Will, the latter His power. [2] (p. 89)

Spinoza, of course, would not hesitate to critique or reformulate Bacon's argument in light of his own metaphysical views. Bacon's distinction between the will of God and God's power, he tells us, is fundamentally flawed²³. What matters here is that Spinoza's discussion of miracles in chapter 6 is framed within a clear Baconian framework. Spinoza first reformulates a Baconian, or at least Baconian-inspired, philosophical argument in favor of his own views on miracles. He then goes on to show that the very same conclusion can also be obtained through historical reasoning alone, viz. through the construction of a 'Baconian' history of miracles that fully takes into account the process of transmission and editing of the text, as well as the intentions and biases of the authors involved.

We have described Spinoza's application of the Baconian method to Scripture as being somewhat Anti-Baconian because it violates Bacon's expressed prohibition against doing so. We shall now explain how Spinoza's radical application of Bacon's method actually has Baconian roots. We argue below that the inductive historical method that Spinoza employs in the TTP and the geometric that Spinoza employs in the *Ethics*, are rooted in a *historiola mentis* that Spinoza constructs in the "manner expounded by Verulam" [1] (p. 861).

3. Contrasting Spinoza and Bacon's *Historiola Mentis*

Recall that in his correspondence with Oldenburg, Spinoza accuses Bacon of completely misunderstanding the nature of the human mind. He said of Bacon that:

... he takes for granted that the human intellect, besides the fallibility of the senses, is by its very nature liable to error, and fashions everything after the analogy of its own nature, and not after the analogy of the universe, so that it is like a mirror presenting an irregular surface to the rays it receives, mingling its own nature with the nature of reality, and so forth. Secondly, he holds that the human intellect by reason of its peculiar nature, is prone to abstractions, and imagines as stable things that are in flux, and so on. Thirdly, he holds that the human intellect is in constant activity, and cannot come to a halt or rest. [1] (pp. 762–763)

Also recall that according to Spinoza's letter to Bouwmeester that:

To acquire this [a true method for sure and unwearied progress in the study of things of the highest importance], we must first of all distinguish between intellect and imagination, that is, between true ideas and the others—fictitious, false, doubtful, and, in sum, all ideas, which depend only on memory. To understand these things, at least as far as the method requires, *there is no need to get to know the nature of mind through its first cause; it is enough to formulate a brief account of the mind [historiola mentis] or its perceptions in the manner expounded by Verulam.* [1] (p. 861)

Because Spinoza insists in his letter to Bouwmeester that philosophical progress does not require a metaphysical account of the mind's unity with nature, but rather only "a

²³ See TTP 6.23: "we have a far better right to call those works we clearly and distinctly understand works of God, and to refer them to God's will, than we do those we are completely ignorant of, though the latter occupy our imagination powerfully and carry men away with wonder. For only the works of nature which we understand clearly and distinctly make our knowledge of God more elevated and indicate God's will and decrees as clearly as possible. So those who have recourse to the will of God when they have no knowledge of a thing are just trifling. It's a ridiculous way of confessing their ignorance." [6] (p. 157).

brief account of the mind or its perceptions, *in the manner expounded by Verulam*” (emphasis ours), it is worth noting that Spinoza provides a *historiola mentis* of the Mind’s Perceptions in the *TIE*, where he introduces the four kinds of knowledge, and where he enumerates the properties of the intellect. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza presents a very similar account of the kinds of knowledge *after* already having explained the various perceptions of the mind through his geometric method²⁴. There, in the *Ethics*, he connects his account of the three kinds of knowledge with his previous metaphysical deductions. He writes: “*From what has been said above, it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions*” [4] (p. 477). And thereby places his claims about our perceptions within the context of his metaphysical account of the human mind. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, however, no such metaphysical explanation is given²⁵ [38]. Instead, Spinoza simply asserts:

I come now to what must be done first, before all else: emending the intellect and rendering it capable of understanding things in the way the attainment of our end requires. To do this, the order we naturally have requires me to survey here all the modes of perceiving which I have had up to now for affirming or denying something without doubt, so that I may choose the best of all, and at the same time begin to know my powers and the nature that I desire to perfect. [38] (p. 12)

He then goes on to give a brief account of the four kinds of perceptions, which, as other commentators have noted, mirrors passages found in Bacon’s *Novum Organum*²⁶ [39].

What we wish to focus upon here is the end of Spinoza’s *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect*. There he claims:

if we attend to the properties of the intellect that we understand clearly and distinctly, its definition will become known through itself. We shall, therefore, enumerate the properties of the intellect here, and consider them, and begin to deal with our innate tools. [38] (p. 43)

He then goes on to offer a *historiola mentis* or more precisely a *historiola intellectus*, an enumerated list of, the properties and powers of the intellect. And this is striking. Spinoza noted in his criticism of Bacon, that Bacon, (unlike Descartes and Spinoza himself) “often takes intellect for mind” [1] (p. 762). It is noteworthy then that throughout the *TIE*, Spinoza takes great pains to distinguish the ideas and perceptions of the intellect from the other imaginative ideas and perceptions of the mind. Indeed, a consideration of the following three comparisons between Bacon and Spinoza’s observations regarding the mind/intellect shows, their disagreement over the introspectively *observable* properties of the intellect is substantial, and explains why Spinoza believes Bacon, “speaks very confusedly on this subject” [1] (p. 762)²⁷. It also explains why Spinoza thinks the geometric method is appropriate to his metaphysics of nature, while a Baconian history would be appropriate for interpreting things within the common order of nature, including written Scripture.

3.1. Comparison A

Bacon’s survey of the mind indicates to him that all our ideas or perceptions come from without.

Man is Nature’s agent and interpreter; he does and understands only as much as he has observed of the order of nature in fact or by inference; he does not know and cannot do more. [14] (p. 33)

²⁴ E2P40s2 [4] (pp. 477–478) comes after Spinoza’s metaphysical explanation of the mind, its perceptions, common notions, adequacy and error.

²⁵ In the *TIE*, Spinoza emphasizes that his account there does not depend on a metaphysical thesis regarding the nature and origin of the mind: “But if you wish, take imagination any way you like here, provided it is something different than the intellect, . . . for it is all the same, however you take it, after we know it is something random, by which the soul is acted on . . . for as I said, it does not matter what I take it to be, after I know that it is something random, etc.” [38] (p. 37).

²⁶ As Edwin Curley notes [38] (p. 12), the similarities between Spinoza with Bacon here is discussed by Joachim [39] (pp. 24–33).

²⁷ It should be noted that the construction of a *historiol mentis* hinges upon *introspective observations*. Indeed, it is from their introspective observations that Spinoza and Bacon categorize the various ideas we possess, and weed out and reject the confused ones (i.e., ‘idols’ or inadequate ideas).

However, Spinoza notices that some of his ideas are not formed through “random experience” but through intellection itself:

That it [the intellect] perceives certain things, or forms certain ideas, absolutely, and forms certain ideas from others. For it forms the idea of quantity absolutely, without attending to other thoughts, but forms the ideas of motion only by attending to the idea of quantity. [38] (p. 43)

3.2. Comparison B

Bacon’s survey of the mind’s tools indicates to him that neither the intellect nor our sense perception is capable of grasping the richness of Nature:

The subtlety of nature far surpasses the subtlety of sense and intellect, so that men’s fine meditations, speculations and endless discussions are quite insane, except that there is no one who notices. [14] (p. 34)

However, Spinoza notices that his intellect’s “innate tools” involve a certainty that they express the world as it is in itself:

That it [the intellect] involves certainty, i.e., that the intellect knows that things are formally as they are contained objectively in itself. [38] (p. 43)

3.3. Comparison C

Bacon’s survey of the mind reveals to him that all paths to knowledge must begin with sense and particulars:

There are, and can be, only two ways to investigate and discover truth. The one leaps from sense and particulars to the most general axioms, and from these principles and their settled truth, determines and discovers intermediate axioms; this is the current way. The other elicits axioms from sense and particulars, rising in a gradual and unbroken ascent to arrive at last at the most general axioms; this is the true way, but it has not been tried. [14] (p. 36)

However, Spinoza claims from his survey that we seem to possess a set of certainly true ideas that seem to follow from our nature alone:

The clear and distinct ideas that we form seem to follow so from the necessity of our nature alone that they seem to depend absolutely on our power alone. But with confused ideas it is quite the contrary—they are often formed against our will. [38] (p. 44)

In short, Bacon’s *historiola mentis* reveals the mind/intellect to be an error-prone faculty that needs be continuously restrained by observation and experimentation:

In a sober, grave and patient character the intellect left to itself . . . makes some attempt . . . but with little success; since without guidance and assistance it is a thing inadequate and altogether incompetent to overcome the obscurity of things. [14] (p. 37)

There remains one hope of salvation, one way to good health: that the entire work of the mind be started over again; and from the very start the mind should not be left to itself, but be constantly controlled; and the business done (if I may put it this way) *by machines*. [14] (p. 28)

However, Spinoza’s *historiola mentis* treats the intellect itself as a “spiritual automaton” [38] (p. 37) that gives us true, certain knowledge of things “infinite” and *sub specie aeternitatis*²⁸:

²⁸ In describing the intellect as a “spiritual automaton,” Spinoza indicates that attempts to restrain the will from affirming this or that idea is not a concern proper to epistemological method, and indicates, why unlike Bacon, Spinoza thinks clear and distinct intellections requires no external restrains.

Those [ideas] that it [the intellect] forms absolutely express infinity. [38] (p. 43)²⁹

It [the intellect] perceives things not so much under duration as under a certain species of eternity, and in an infinite number—or rather, to perceive things, it attends neither to number nor to duration; but when it imagines things, it perceives them under a certain number, determinate duration and quantity. [38] (p. 44)

According to *the historiola mentis* constructed by Spinoza, (and presented in the manner of Bacon), the intellect can give perfect knowledge of the general universal structures of God or Nature. The intellect offers a path to the knowledge of things via intellectual ideas that are perfect and absolute, and which yield perception of things from *sub specie aeternitatis*.

And so, whereas Bacon holds that all paths to knowledge must begin with “sense and particulars”, Spinoza holds there are *two* grounds for knowledge—one of sense and particulars, and one of universal intellectual axioms. Spinoza explains these two grounds in the TTP:

If anyone, in arguing for or against a proposition which is not self-evident, seeks to persuade others to accept his view, he proves his point from premises that are granted, and he must convince his audience on empirical grounds or by force of reason; that is, *either from what sense-perception tells them occurs in Nature, or through self-evident intellectual axioms*. Now unless experience is such as to be clearly and distinctly understood, it cannot have so decisive an effect on a man’s understanding and dispel the mists of doubt as when the desired conclusion is deduced solely from intellectual axioms, that is, from the mere force of the intellect and its orderly apprehensions. This is especially so if the point at issue is a spiritual matter and does not come within the scope of senses. [6] (pp. 147–148)

With all this in mind, it is not too difficult to see why Spinoza employs the geometric method in the *Ethics*. There, Spinoza is involved in a discussion of spiritual matters which lie beyond the scope of the senses, and whose ultimate basis is a set of self-evident intellectual ideas and axioms³⁰. It is also no longer too difficult to see why Spinoza *does not* employ the geometric method in the TTP as he investigates Scripture. As he points out in this work:

Scripture most often treats things which cannot be deduced from principles known to the natural light. For historical narratives and revelations make up the greatest part of it . . . Moreover, the revelations were accommodated to the opinions of the Prophets; they really surpass man’s power of understanding. So the knowledge of all these things, i.e., of almost everything in Scripture, must be sought only from Scripture itself, just as the knowledge of nature must be sought from nature itself. [6] (p. 171)

Thus, divinely inspired or not, our only tool for interpreting written scripture is the same tool we use for interpreting aspects of nature that are not directly intelligible via the natural light. This tool, is the same, familiar, Baconian method that Spinoza used to distinguish the natural light from the imagination; namely, the careful organization of particular perceptions (or certain data) so that it can be examined by reason and from which general principles can be drawn.

Now, in the *Ethics*, of course, Spinoza shows why the imagination, on its own, is an uncertain guide to the truth of things.

So long as the human mind perceives things from the common order of nature, it does not have an adequate, but only a confused and mutilated knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies.” [4] (p. 471)

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza explains why we form inadequate ideas:

²⁹ It should be noted that in the *Ethics* (see E2P34), Spinoza asserts that “absolute” ideas are adequate, perfect, and true.

³⁰ This is not to say the *Ethics* does not depend in part on non-intellectual ideas or perceptions. It is only to say that it depends upon, and is driven by intellectual ideas and deductions.

I. from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect (see P29C); for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience.

II. from signs, e.g., from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagined the things (P18S). These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination. [4] (pp. 477–478)

And, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza explains why these sorts of perceptions, and the abstractions derived from them are causes of falsity [4] (pp. 175–477). But one does not need to look at the metaphysics of the *Ethics* to see why Spinoza thinks a perfect understanding of Scripture cannot be achieved via universal intellectual axioms alone. In the TIE, Spinoza asserts from his *historia mentis* that:

Words are a part of the imagination, i.e., since we feign many concepts, in accordance with the random composition of words in the memory from the 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.

Moreover, they are established according to the pleasure and power of understanding ordinary people, so that they are only signs of things as they are in the imagination and not as they in the intellect. [38] (p. 38)

It is clear then that the intellect alone is incapable of deducing the meaning of words, or deducing the opinions, and imaginations of unknown authors. And, as Spinoza emphasizes in the TTP, an investigation into written Scripture is an investigation into the history, language, symbols, and imagination of unknown people:

[T]he historical narratives give a prominent place to . . . unusual events in nature, accommodated to the opinions and judgments of the historians who wrote them. [6] (p. 171)

It is not through the natural light alone that we come to know of these historical events, or become capable of drawing conclusions about their narrators. Such knowledge depends upon data that is not derived from the intellect alone, but from particular experiences: “it is only by chance that the comparison of utterances can throw light on an utterance”. [6] (p. 182)

In the TIE, Spinoza speaks about the usefulness of *random experience* in attaining pragmatic knowledge of the natural world:

I shall illustrate all of these with examples. I know only from report my date of birth, and who my parents were, and similar things, which I have never doubted. By *random* experience I know that I shall die, for I affirm this because I have seen others like me die, even though they had not all lived the same length of time and did not all die of the same illness. Again, I also know by random experience that oil is capable of feeding fire, and that water is capable of putting it out. I know also that the dog is a barking animal, and man a rational one. *And in this way [the first kind of knowing] I know almost all the things that are useful in life.* [38] (pp. 13–14)

It is in this light that we can understand Spinoza’s famous *method of interpreting nature* passage in the TTP:

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. [6] (p. 171)

We have then a resolution of our puzzles. Spinoza embraces the Baconian natural historical method as a method purifying and ordering one's perceptions. Unlike Bacon, Spinoza believes a *historiola mentis* reveals the intellect to be spiritual automaton that grasps universal truths of God/Nature *sub specie aeternitatis*. Hence, Spinoza concludes the geometric method is the appropriate method for metaphysics, and that the natural light of reason is sufficient for enlightenment. Yet, to interpret the common order nature—the relations of determinate bodies, images, etc.—Spinoza holds that the natural historical method is the appropriate method to use, and remains the best means available for interpreting historical documents like Scripture.

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