



Imagination and Freedom: Spinoza's 'Hard Path' and George Eliot's Artful Bridge¹

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ABOVE
Gustave Doré's illustration of Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

RIGHT

Spinoza.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Contemporary appraisals of Spinoza's philosophy are divided about the role he assigns to passion and imagination: do they contribute to, or prevent, the development of understanding and freedom? The source of these contrary views might be traced to the dissonance between Spinoza's description of the passionate multitude in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the figure of the rational 'free man' he offers in the *Ethics*.² Given his low opinion of 'the masses', what chance does an ordinary person have to pursue what Spinoza called 'the hard path to freedom'? Does his philosophy offer two disturbingly distinct pictures of political and ethical life: the unruly mob that must be constrained versus the elite man of reason? I argue that George Eliot's development of Spinoza's account of affect, imagination and fiction can take us beyond this unsatisfactory dichotomy.

Eliot wrote what I will call 'deliberative fictions', which – precisely because of their avowed fictitious status – are able to convey truths about the human condition. What I mean by a deliberative fiction is a fiction that, while *affirming* its fictitiousness, nevertheless works to demystify the confusions inherent to affective and imaginative ways of life. Eliot's fictions aim to engage the imagination and affects of her readers in a way that cultivates the reflective and critical capabilities of thought, thereby facilitating the expansion of their understanding. In this way



deliberative fictions can enhance the capacity of human beings to become free. My thesis is that the notion of a deliberative fiction goes some way towards bridging the lacuna in Spinoza's political thought between his negative assessment of the multitude and his account of the ethical potential of *all* human beings to become free.

I propose to explore this thesis with reference to Eliot's novella *Silas Marner*. It is set in the early

nineteenth century and Marner, a simple weaver, is a member of a small community of Calvinist dissenters that believes in the literal truth of the Bible. When Marner is falsely accused of the theft of church funds, the congregation relies on the authority of the Old Testament to bring him to account through the drawing of lots. He is found guilty and exiled from his community. Rather than find fault with the method of casting lots, or with the beliefs and practices of his community, Marner blames God. In a passionate outburst he cries: ‘There is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent.’³ This is a perplexing reaction. If one felt sceptical about the procedure followed for determining the guilt of an accused, then that scepticism turns into incredulity when responsibility for the outcome of this bizarre method is projected onto a demonic and deceitful God.

How might one come to understand the peculiar beliefs and practices of Marner and his community? If a literary presentation of a given way of life were to be successful, the incredulous



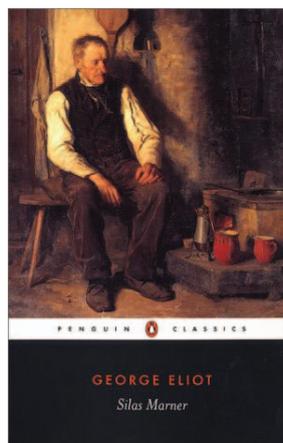
reader would gradually come to understand Marner’s confused and angry response. Certainly, this is part of Eliot’s aim when she explains to her readers that although we may be able to distinguish between ‘religious feeling’, on the one hand, and the variety of forms through which that feeling might find expression, on the other, the simple-minded Silas Marner cannot. For him, she writes, ‘the form and the feeling have never been severed

by an act of reflection’. The ability to separate his faith from a particular religious practice, says Eliot, ‘would have been an effort of independent thought such as [Marner] had never known’ (*SM*, 14).

This story provides an illustration of Spinoza’s critique of literalist interpretations of the Bible. But the connection between Eliot and Spinoza is more profound than this. Eliot started a translation of Spinoza’s *TTP* in 1843 and completed a translation of the *Ethics* in 1856. Although Spinoza was only one influence on the development of her thought, he was a very significant one. In addition to Spinoza’s *TTP* and the *Ethics*, she also translated David Strauss’ *Life of Jesus* in 1846 and Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* in 1854. What is significant about all three philosophers is that each treated religion as the natural expression of a veiled truth that can be uncovered given the appropriate methodological approach. Their critiques of religion sought to reveal the latent meaning of scripture and religion through a study of the projected desires, wishes, and fears that religion masks in metaphor and allegory. Religion, Feuerbach insisted, should be approached as an

anthropological account of human history, that is, a distorted but ultimately edifying picture of common fears, hopes and desires.

Silas Marner succeeds as a work of fiction because it progressively draws the reader into an imaginary world in which



Marner’s beliefs begin to make sense, a world in which his actions, his suffering and his joy form part of a meaningful social whole. In this way, a belief that initially seemed ridiculous becomes meaningful when understood as a component that integrates with a broader milieu of shared beliefs and practices. Literature attempts to engage the reader’s imagination in order that she invests in the cognitive and affective lives of the characters in a work. Fiction, then, can provide a horizon within which unfamiliar beliefs and forms of understanding can become legible to an appropriately engaged reader. Literary works can enhance the understanding of readers through immersion in a constructed world in which imaginings and beliefs are embodied in

FAR LEFT

George Eliot.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

LEFT

Silas Marner.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

specific characters that are, in turn, embedded in particular socio-historical contexts. Part of the peculiar power of literature concerns this ability to show how particular ways of *knowing the world* and particular ways of *being in the world* are mutually co-implicated.

Philosophy also aims to understand how what can be known affects, and is affected by, specific ways of life. Typically, however, philosophers pursue this aim by abstracting from particular forms of embodiment and by generalising across the various historical and cultural ways of life in which knowledge is embedded. Philosophy aims to extract the kernel of truth at the heart of diversity. Spinoza aimed to understand not only how particular ways of being in the world affect what can be known about the world, but also to ascertain what are the *general* principles that determine *every* correlation between ways of being and ways of knowing. The work for which Spinoza is best known is the *Ethics*. This challenging account of 'the right way of living' yields surprisingly few moral prohibitions or imperatives. Rather, it presents a five-part account of what we are, what we can know, what are our limitations, what are our powers, and how we might realise the maximum degree of freedom and virtue of which we are capable. Spinoza dramatically departed from the views of his contemporaries by insisting on a holistic view of nature, which fully includes human nature. Every individual in nature is connected to every other and the privileged status of human beings within nature is rejected along with certain Judeo-Christian assumptions that sustain that

understanding of necessity. The distinct freedom of human beings amounts to our ability to understand nature: 'I call him free who is led by reason alone' (EIVP68Dem). Freedom, then, does not involve the ability to will in accordance with my desire but rather the exercise of the capacity to understand the causes of my desire. The more we understand nature, the more active we become, and the more active we become, the more we express our power, virtue, or freedom. This is why the second half of the *Ethics* offers a detailed analysis of a range of affects, or emotions, that are generated from the fundamental triad of desire, joy and sadness. Becoming free always means becoming more joyful. But if joyful feelings can serve to guide us on the path to perfection and freedom, why, on Spinoza's own admission, should this path be 'hard' and 'difficult', and the achievement of freedom so 'rare' (EVP42S)? One can find a succinct response to this question in the Preface to the *TTP*: 'men generally know not their own selves'.

The *TTP* argues that most people live in the imagination and fictions rule their lives. Most experiences, Spinoza says, 'are like conclusions without premises' (EIIIP28Dem). We experience joy or sadness (that is, the 'conclusion' of an encounter), but we are often ignorant or confused about the cause of the joyful or sad experience (that is, the 'premises' of an encounter). It is this phenomenological peculiarity of human experience that allows superstition and religion to acquire such a firm hold over the imagination. Our inborn egotism, along with our natural attachment to a teleological worldview, encourages the

PHILOSOPHY AIMS TO EXTRACT THE KERNEL OF TRUTH AT THE HEART OF DIVERSITY

privilege. On Spinoza's view, if we are to have a true understanding of what we are then we must repudiate two key ideas of traditional religion: first, the anthropomorphic conception of God as the transcendent creator of the world; and second, the notion that things are arranged in accordance with a *telos* or goal. At the close of Part I of the *Ethics* Spinoza refers to these ideas as 'the sanctuary of ignorance'. By sheltering from criticism our egotistical projections, the idea of a transcendent God who wills the world into existence prevents us from acquiring adequate knowledge of nature.

In Spinoza's view, freedom is grounded in an

psychological predisposition to grasp experience in the form of narrative. This, in turn, renders uneducated people especially vulnerable to manipulation by religion and political ideologies because these offer ready-made narratives that provide structure and meaning for everyday experience. The essential ethical question – how to live rightly – inevitably leads Spinoza to the study of religion and politics. An individual can do only so much remedial work on his or her imagination and emotions. There are also collective social, political and theological imaginaries whose resistance to critique can be formidable.

Eliot endorsed Spinoza's critique of religion, along with his account of the crucial part religion plays in founding sociability, but whereas he plots the path to freedom through an understanding of the *general principles* by which we are held in bondage to our passions, she saw his abstract philosophical approach and his ideal model of the free man to be inscrutable to all but an elite few. His explication of 'the nature and powers of the affects, and the power of the mind over them' through the deployment of the geometric method that 'considers human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies' (EIIIIPref) is unlikely to engage the understanding of a non-philosopher.

In a passage that could be interpreted as a response to Spinoza's geometric method,

and the implied audience of Spinoza's texts. A vital distinction between them is reflected in their respective attitudes toward their readers. Whereas Spinoza expressed his strong preference that the common people (*vulgus*) refrain from reading the *TTP*, Eliot directly compared the vocation of the author to 'the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind'.⁵ As many theorists have noted, this particular conception of 'the public mind' reflects a shift in nineteenth-century conceptions of the relations between the 'elite' and the 'multitude', and is connected to the increased rates of literacy and the rise of the novel as a primary means through which national and local identities were being formed and imagined. The novel allowed an increasingly educable public to imaginatively connect the experiences of the high-born and

IN SPINOZA'S VIEW, FREEDOM IS GROUNDED IN AN UNDERSTANDING OF NECESSITY

transposed to a modern idiom, Eliot insists that 'molecular physics is not the direct ground of human love and moral action any more than it is the direct means of composing a noble picture or of enjoying great music'. It is true, she admits, 'that every study has its bearing on every other' but still 'pain and relief, love and sorrow, have their peculiar history, which make an experience and knowledge over and above the swing of atoms'.⁴ She could easily have said that affective experience cannot be reduced to lines, planes and bodies. Her novels may be read as studies that chart the specificity of the interconnected histories of the pain and relief, love and sorrow, of her deftly drawn characters. These studies, however, are presented in such a way that the Spinozistic general principles that determine human action and suffering are always embodied in particulars. And the *specificity* of each case of love, or pain, or sorrow, has ethical import. Although they suffer from similar affects and endure similar legal and social disadvantages, in Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) the love and sorrow experienced by Rosamond Vincy is not ethically equivalent to the experiences of love and sorrow of Dorothea Brooke. The quality of their joys and sorrows are – like their characters – incomparable.

Like Spinoza, Eliot was cautious about the capacity of the multitude to be, or to become, self-governing. However, there is a vast difference between the constitution of her reading public

low-born, of town-folk and country-folk, and of men and women, in a manner that opened new channels for sympathetic fellow-feeling and for the formation of classed, sexed, and national identities.

Eliot's contribution to the edification of 'the public mind' is best understood against the backdrop of the influence of the philosophers of Biblical critique, especially Spinoza. Like them, she saw the critique of religion as essential to the



LEFT

Statue of Ariosto.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

maturation of humanity. However, her approach was not to offer more overt critique but rather to construct enabling fictions that challenge the religious imaginary from within. Her novels, that is, self-consciously re-trace the imaginative pathways of religion – its parables, prophetic visions, and methods of capturing passion – in a way that erodes the old forms in order to create new, more enabling narratives. Her re-staging of Bible stories, infused with unorthodox narrative interventions, provides an opportunity for her readers to deliberate on conventional meanings and morals and to un-make and re-make their habitual

reflective capacity to separate religious feeling from the various forms that such feeling might take. The story of his exile, despair and redemption tracks his partial acquisition of this reflective ability. By opening the story with the distinction between form and feeling, Eliot situates her reader in a deliberative space where she is led to the exercise of the very capacity that Marner lacks, namely, to reflect on religious feeling as distinct from the variety of ways in which that feeling might find expression. Eliot shows *how*, rather than states *that*, Marner’s community context determines his inability to adequately reflect on his situation

THE ESSENTIAL ETHICAL QUESTION – HOW TO LIVE RIGHTLY – INEVITABLY LEADS SPINOZA TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

chains of thought. But this critique of religion is internal to her literary practice. Eliot’s novels enact an immanent re-interpretation of the meaning and significance of a range of religious tropes: sin, forgiveness and redemption. In some ways, this notion of immanent critique – achieved through artful reinterpretation – pulls against certain aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy. Most especially, Eliot’s faith in art as a powerful force for the improvement of understanding, and the expansion of sympathy, highlights the lack of any definite outline of a theory of art in Spinoza’s philosophy. This is a question to which I shall return.

As noted above, Eliot opens *Silas Marner* with a description of Marner as someone who lacks the

and how this mystification, in turn, depletes his capacity to understand himself and so renders him unfree. Marner’s superstitious community may consider drawing lots as an adequate method of revealing God’s judgment on an accused but neither Eliot’s contemporaries nor the modern day reader are likely to concur. Already, then, in the first few pages of the novella, she has caused a fracture to appear in the credibility of Biblical authority. If the Books of *Joshua* and *Jonah* contain erroneous beliefs, what is to prevent other parts of the Bible containing falsehoods?

Marner’s story can be read as a reprise of the *Book of Job*. Like Job, Marner’s life is stripped of everything that had made it intelligible (God’s love and protection), of all that made it worthwhile (family, friends, community), and of what made it a distinctly human life (the ability to link the past with the present and to enjoy the capacity to imagine a future). The interlacing of knowledge, feeling and imagination that made up the fabric of his life has been torn, and the first half of *Silas Marner* shows how his way of being progressively unravels and his powers of action dramatically diminish. Deprived of the ready-made context of his community, he is unable to find any stable form through which his complex thoughts and emotions can be expressed, and so he sinks into a mere animal existence. With the loss of the form of his belief Marner has lost the capacity to sustain a meaningful human life. Equipped with the skill to produce a valuable commodity – linen – he is not driven away from his new location but nor is Marner accepted as a member of the

RIGHT
Ludovico Ariosto,
painting by
Cristofano
dell’Altissimo,
before 1568.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA
COMMONS.



community. He sets up his loom in a cottage on the edge of the village and he lives, works and eats in solitude. This is the 'insect-like existence into which his nature had shrunk' (SM, 118). Cut off from his past, and lacking the trust to risk opening himself up to his new context, Marner lives in the meaningless present in the manner of an animal. Deprived of his habitual way of being he ceases to think, to feel, or to desire and works from instinct, 'impulse' and 'without reflection', just like 'a spinning insect' (SM, 116-117).

He is redeemed from his inhuman existence by two things: the sympathy extended to him by one of the villagers and his love for an apparently orphaned child. After Marner has been robbed of his life savings – a hidden hoard of gold coins that he has come to see as his only companions – sympathy from the villagers offers some consolation. It is through friendship that Marner eventually discloses his life story and so opens his closed life to the possibility of new connections provided by sympathetic fellow feeling. But it is the mysterious arrival of a small child at his cottage, one snowy evening, which fully awakens his sympathetic feeling. Searching for a clue as to how the infant came to be so far from the village, he finds her mother lying dead in the snow. Marner's impulse to keep and protect this golden-haired child is simply expressed: 'it's a lone thing – and I'm a lone thing. My money's gone, I don't know where – and this is come from I don't know where' (SM, 118). The legendary quality of *Silas Marner* is apparent: 'the gold had turned into the child' (SM, 122). Marner's feelings for the child restore his human consciousness by re-connecting him with his emotional and moral capacities. Her possibilities become his rediscovered possibilities and her wonder and joy at the discovery of new things reawakens his capacity for joy. Like Job, all that was taken from Marner is eventually returned. But unlike the story of Job, in Eliot's re-telling they are returned through the exercise of the thoroughly immanent human powers of sympathy and love.

But can the frame of Spinoza's philosophy accommodate the edifying role of fiction, as proposed by Eliot? Isn't it the case that Spinoza's philosophy criticises the fictional productions of the imagination and emotion? How can Eliot's fictional works be understood in terms of an appropriation and amplification of key elements in Spinoza's philosophy? I will begin to defend the viability of reading Eliot's novels as forging a genealogical line with Spinoza's critique of religion and his immanent account of ethical life by considering his views on the common falsehoods

and shared fictions that prevent the development of human understanding. Some commentators argue that because Spinoza views the imagination as the sole source of error then the imagination always will be a hindrance to the development of reason and freedom. My view is that Spinoza's account of the imagination is more heterogeneous than these kinds of interpretation allow, and that his estimation of the powers of the imagination changes over the time he developed his philosophy.

It would be helpful to offer an account of the kinds of imaginative fiction Spinoza criticises as well as to consider some of those that he himself employed. In broad outline, I suggest we can discern at least five very general types of fiction relevant to our concerns. These are: mythology, storytelling, religion, theologico-political ideologies and hypothetical philosophical posits. Each type of fiction arises from distinct human needs and desires and, generally speaking, has different aims. For example, Biblical narratives answer the need of relatively uneducated people to have a clear and simple code of conduct that is easy to follow; the fiction of divine rule meets the desire of the powerful to ensure the security and longevity of their rule; and the drive of philosophers to attain an adequate understanding of nature generates hypotheses that aim to help explain the way things are. I will say something briefly about each type of fiction.

Spinoza frequently refers to the works of Terence and Ovid and to the mythologies that informed their worldviews. For example, he uses Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to illustrate his thesis on feigning and fictions. The fifteen books of the *Metamorphoses* offer a mythological account of the origin of the world, the extraordinary powers of the gods, and end with the deification of Julius Caesar. It is clearly this text that Spinoza has in mind when he writes: 'the less men know Nature, the more easily they can feign many things, such as, that trees speak, that men are changed



ABOVE

Gustave Doré's illustration of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

in a moment into stones and into springs, that nothing becomes something, that even gods are changed into beasts and into men'.⁶ Mythological fictions offer some protection from the utter indifference of nature to human concerns and interests. They can function to reduce fear by humanising nature through the projection of human need and emotion. However, while mythological explanations of the world might help to assuage fear, they also mystify the order of the natural world and so prevent the development of adequate knowledge about that order.

Although mythology obviously involves narrative Spinoza appears to distinguish it from those stories that primarily aim to amuse. In this context he mentions Ludovico Ariosto's sixteenth-century poem *Orlando Furioso* that tells of winged dragons, battles with giants, and other 'fantastic happenings' that, he says, 'are quite incomprehensible in respect to our intellect' (*TTP*, 97). Such stories directly appeal to the imagination with the ambition of entertaining the reader who must suspend his critical powers in order to enjoy them. Fictions such as these do not intend to persuade the reader that the improbable events they portray are real, nor do they pretend to educate or edify the reader with respect to facts about the world.

The overt fictitiousness of the narrative

imaginaries. Although Spinoza judges religion to be useful, at certain times and for certain people, when theologians attempt to enlist philosophy in order to demonstrate the *literal truth* of religious narratives the result will be intellectual confusion, oppression and persecution. Spinoza was not an enemy of religion or derogatory about religious faith that is sincerely held. Rather, the target of his criticism is theology, and especially those theologians who seek to control what people think and believe through the exercise of state power.

In a passionate passage in the *TTP* Spinoza rails against tyranny, saying that its supreme mystery 'is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation, and count it no shame, but the highest honour, to spend their blood and their lives for the glorification of one man' (*TTP*, 3). The lust for power of theologians transforms sincerely held faith into dangerous dogma, or ideology. Once a people have fallen under the sway of theologico-political fictions they become dangerous and divisive, each faction wishing that only their 'truth' be recognised.

Finally, Spinoza writes about a special kind of fiction, namely, a philosophical hypothesis that can serve as a device for pedagogic or illustrative purposes, or as a guide to conduct.

SPINOZA WAS NOT AN ENEMY OF RELIGION OR DEROGATORY ABOUT RELIGIOUS FAITH THAT IS SINCERELY HELD

constructions of storytellers is one way in which story telling can be distinguished from Scripture. The Bible contains many narrative episodes – the garden of Eden, Susanna and the Elders, Noah's ark, the good Samaritan – but they are presented as historical accounts of actual persons and real events, that is, as *literally true*. Spinoza's view of such narratives is that they seek to encourage ordinary people of little learning to obey a moral code. The stories are simple, the moral lesson of each story is evident, and the lesson is easy to remember and to re-tell across generations: disobedience will be punished, lust and deception lead to disruption of community, the pious will be saved, love thy neighbour as thyself, and so on. Taken together they add up to a complete moral code. The conditions of life of many people would be untenable without the guidance afforded by such comprehensive moral

Here, I am using 'hypothesis' in a broad sense to include: a theoretical posit, a supposition in an argument, a thought experiment, or a provisional conjecture. Contemporary philosophers make use of hypotheses when they devise 'thought experiments'. For example, John Rawls uses the fictions of the 'original position' and the 'veil of ignorance' to explore common intuitions about justice.⁷ As well as having a pedagogical function these philosophical fictions can also lead to the refinement of important concepts, or of the relations between concepts. Spinoza sometimes employed imaginary stories in order to illustrate a philosophical point. Well-known examples include a self-deceived stone and a worm with elementary powers of deduction.⁸ In each case, these fictions perform an illustrative or pedagogic function.

But there is another more troubling use of the imagination and fiction in Spinoza's

philosophy that is of a different order to those just mentioned. In the *Ethics* he offers a model of human nature – a philosophical *exemplar* of the free man – as an ideal that we should strive to emulate even though it is impossible that a completely free man could ever exist. Moreover, this model does not play a simple explanatory function but rather has a vital normative role in Spinoza’s ethical and political theory. Spinoza writes, ‘I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model’ (EIVPref). The *exemplar* of human nature is meant to perform a profoundly evaluative role in ethical life.

Does Spinoza’s *philosophical* deployment of an *exemplar* alter the fact that it is nevertheless an imaginative ideal, in short, a fiction? And if what Spinoza offers as a guide to ethical conduct is a fiction, are we not entitled to ask why we should prefer his model to the models of conduct supplied by religion, for example, the imitation of Christ? The powers of the imagination and imitation may be equally active in each case but the crucial difference between a philosophical fiction and a Biblical fiction concerns the role played by deliberation in the former. In the case of a philosophical fiction one is aware that the ideal is a fictional device – a mode of thought – that serves as a guide for the human drive to understand nature. It may be *literally false* but nevertheless *truth-seeking*. In the case of the religious exemplar, a fiction of the perfect man is posited as *literally true*: an actual individual, Christ, the son of God, exists. For the philosopher, the imagination is used as an aid to gaining knowledge whereas in the case of religion it is used as a substitute for knowledge. Spinoza’s use of an imaginative model to guide human conduct highlights an important feature of his moral philosophy, namely, that the use of the imagination and fiction are inescapable for any form of life that gives itself a code of conduct. No less than the multitude, the philosopher cannot do without imagination and fiction in the pursuit of the right way to live. This is because nature does not, and cannot, provide us with such a code. Nature is morally neutral and entirely indifferent to our desire to survive and flourish. Moral codes may be understood as revisable hypothetical posits that are responsive to experience and to new knowledge about human nature. So long as philosophical fictions remain aware of their fictitiousness then they



LEFT
Silas finds Eppie, illustration, 1910.
SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

are of a different order than theological fictions.

These five types of imaginative fiction call for a more detailed analysis than can be offered here. Nevertheless, even this rudimentary taxonomy confirms that on Spinoza’s view *some* fictions are especially adept at engaging the imagination and in capturing affect in a way that prevents the development of human knowledge and freedom (e.g. theologico-political ideologies). The bare thesis that imaginative fictions may lead to error and unfreedom is not in doubt. The more interesting question is: can the imagination and fiction also play a role in the *development* of knowledge and in the *realisation* of human freedom? The analysis of the fifth type of fiction suggests that some Spinoza scholars have been too swift in drawing a line of equivalence from imagination to fiction to falsehood. The imagination is essentially bivalent. A fictional posit also may serve as a model that can function as a guide for the realisation of human potential. Fictional posits can facilitate as well as impede human understanding and freedom.

If we follow Spinoza’s typology of fictions, to which category would George Eliot’s novels correspond? Given that Eliot’s fictions strive to teach the proper causal order of things then they are at odds with the form of writing that Spinoza describes as Scripture. And, insofar as she deliberately appeals to, and strives to engage, her readers’ emotional and imaginative powers, her fictions are also at odds with Spinoza’s formal



RIGHT

Susanna and the Elders, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, c. 1722.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

account of philosophy. However, Eliot's novels are a form of writing that also is at odds with Spinoza's conception of the modest aims of storytellers to entertain their readers. Eliot selects some elements from each of these genres: she has what Spinoza referred to as the robust imagination and the sincerity of heart of the genuine prophet, the patient and diligent observational skills of the philosopher, and the talent of the storyteller for capturing the imagination and stirring the emotions of her audience. Eliot's conception of the edifying potential of art pushes at the border of what Spinoza's philosophy can accommodate. She conceived of her novels as a vehicle for instruction,

imagination' of the artist and mere 'fictions of fancy'. It is the special talent of the artist who possesses the superior 'powerful' imagination both to uncover latent meaning in the everyday and to construct new combinations from past experience, emotion, and individual and cultural memory. To be worthy of the name, an artwork should have the force to compel us to attend to the familiar with deliberative attention. An artistic representation, for Eliot, is always a matter of re-visioning: attending to what is thought to be ordinary, uneventful, or mundane, in order to promote deliberation on the extraordinary that lies within the mundane. Her fictions dissect and lay bare the complexity of human feelings and relationships, and the power of historical, social, and political contexts to shape those feelings and relationships. Eliot's re-tracing of the causal links between the present and the past works to reconstruct the webs of belief in which we all dwell. Her account of imagination, emotion and fiction, and their potential to contribute constructively to knowledge, both builds on and goes beyond Spinoza's philosophy.

In her view, although philosophy and art have distinct methodologies, knowledge in each case is gained through careful observation of, and critical reflection on, experience and nature. It is this account of artistic knowledge that underpins Eliot's distinctive ethical realism in art and her championing of the hypothetical method. In one of her letters she referred to her novels as 'simply a set of experiments in life'. Philosophical abstractions can obscure the ethical dimension of the deeply textured nature of human life, and this

NATURE IS MORALLY NEUTRAL AND ENTIRELY INDIFFERENT TO OUR DESIRE TO SURVIVE AND FLOURISH

that is, as a potential causal agent in the *revision* of belief, in the *reformation* of her reader's moral sensibilities, and in the promotion of more adequate understandings of the world. In all these tasks the role of the imagination is paramount.

Even though Eliot's ameliorative conception of art pushes at the borders of Spinoza's thought, she shares common ground with him in relation to her view of the imagination. She too was critical of the capricious imagination. She makes an important distinction between the 'powerful

is why her letter continues with the observation that 'I become more and more timid – with less daring to adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure and individual experience, and perhaps that is a sign that if I help others to see at all it must be through the medium of art' (*Letters*, VI, 216-17). By describing her fiction as a set of experiments in life Eliot presents an understanding of her novels as experimental forms in which the playing out of various hypotheses provoke the reader's

deliberative faculties. Eliot aimed to write truthful, or truth-seeking, fictions. Her fictional accounts of people and places, actions and passions, conscientiously track everyday human experience, real historical events, common moral dilemmas, and extant individual and cultural narratives. They are not fictions of fancy that tell of monsters and flying dragons, nor do they claim for themselves the status of divine revelation. Eliot's fictions are the product of what she called 'the veracious imagination'.⁹ They are constructions much closer to the genre of Spinoza's philosophical fictions.

Spinoza's complex attitude towards passion, imagination and fiction, and the roles they might play in gaining knowledge of self, others and nature, has given rise to widely divergent interpretations and appropriations of his philosophy. Eliot's literary works offer an alternative appropriation and extension of Spinoza's philosophy. Her assumption of Spinoza's legacy is significant for the way in which it develops an integrated view of the potential of passion, imagination and fiction for the pursuit of freedom. The nature of her art practice however cannot be understood in purely aesthetic terms. Art, for her, is essentially ethical.¹⁰ Through her 'experiments in life' she shows that the pursuit of freedom requires a calibrated reform of the passions of the self along with the broader contexts within which selves are formed. Eliot's contribution to this recalibration is to expose the complexities of the relationships between individuals within particular political, religious and social contexts, and to invite sober deliberation about the possibilities for individual and collective change given relevant personal, historical and political constraints.

Deliberative fictions show that passion and imagination do not necessarily act to block understanding of the self, others and nature. Certain kinds of fiction can increase our understanding of the vicissitudes of the affects and the powerful shaping force of social institutions. I am not suggesting that Eliot aimed to translate Spinoza's philosophy into novelistic form. Rather, I propose that she assiduously developed an important strand of his account of the power of passion, imagination and fiction to shape human lives. The notion of a fiction that invites critical deliberation on the links between our ways of knowing and our ways of being holds out the promise of bridging the lacuna in Spinoza's philosophy between the ethical ideal of the free man and the real conditions

of life of the multitude. It is the construction of this artful bridge that opens another, more inclusive, path to freedom. This path signals the advent of a new genre of writing that would have puzzled Spinoza: the philosophical novel.



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Spinoza's Hard Path to Freedom: Spinoza Lectures (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2011).

- 1 This essay is an edited version of my Presidential Address to the Annual Conference of the Australasian Association of Philosophy, Otago, New Zealand, July 2011.
- 2 References to the *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)* are to *Spinoza Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. by Samuel Shirley 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001). References to the *Ethics* are to *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, Volume I, 1985). I use the standard method of referencing where E stands for the Ethics, I – V for its five parts, P for Proposition, S for Scholium, Pref for Preface, and Dem for Demonstration.
- 3 George Eliot, *Silas Marner* [1861] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 14. Hereafter, *SM* followed by page numbers.
- 4 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-78), Vol. 6, pp. 98-99. Hereafter, *Letters* followed by volume and page numbers.
- 5 See Eliot's essay 'Authorship' in 'Leaves from a Notebook', in *Essays and Leaves from a Notebook*, ed. by Charles Lewes (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1884), p. 358.
- 6 *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* in *Collected Works of Spinoza*, p. 27.
- 7 John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) is a very influential text in political philosophy. The idea of 'the original position' is that if free and equal citizens imagine themselves behind a 'veil of ignorance' where they lack knowledge of their sex, race, class and abilities, then their intuitions concerning what would constitute fair and just social, political and economic arrangements would be impartial.
- 8 Spinoza wrote about the hubristic stone and the clever worm in Letters XXXII and LVIII, respectively. See *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, trans. and ed. by A. Wolf (London: Frank Cass, 1966), pp. 209-214 and pp. 294-298.
- 9 'Leaves from a Notebook', in *Essays and Leaves from a Notebook*, p. 371-72.
- 10 Her guiding principle is captured in her statement that 'If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally' (*Letters*, II, 86).