

## Jacques Derrida Language and the Discourse of Method<sup>1</sup>

[11, 4] Nevertheless, *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* is an instructional text and the editors of the Pléiade edition are wrong to say that the book “is not intended to contain the doctrine of the philosopher,” (Spinoza). It is true that essentially and according to his declared intention this is a presentation according to the order of synthetic and geometrical exposition of Descartes' principles. But as the editors of the Pléiade edition themselves note, the first part, written in 15 days, is rather critical – and we will see on what points and in what way the most powerful axes of Spinozist thought concerning method are already proclaimed there.

A book of instruction – and there, too, it is necessary to take into account for many reasons, but above all because the question of method in general, our question here, is inseparable from the question of instruction [*enseignement*] (of the technical, historical, political etc. question of instruction). [...]

[11, 7] Although, as I have said, *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* is a didactic exposition of Descartes' *Principles*, it nevertheless contains a significant number of critical marks precisely about method and which express, as it is said, all that will follow. It is thus after having presented what he calls “the pure opinions of Descartes and their demonstrations such as one finds them in his writings that one can derive the foundation on which they are established by way of legitimate consequence” and so “without departing a hair's breadth,”<sup>2</sup> always pretending to report the teaching of an author, which he represents only at the moment of printing and publication, that Spinoza announces that a number of Descartes' opinions have been rejected because they were judged false, and among these, as one will see, the determinant themes or philosophemes pertaining to the question of method. [11, 8] We can already see inflexions that are hardly Cartesian in the section of exposition and commentary where he pretends not to deviate in the slightest from Descartes' opinions. If you read these first pages you will see – beyond all the motifs of the (maritime and terrestrial) route [*la route*] that are rather abundantly treated and about which I have already said too much and which I will treat now by

omission – a mathematicism and especially a syntheticism, a privilege accorded to the synthetic way of apodictic demonstration that is not very Cartesian. Spinoza recalls the Cartesian distinction between the synthetic method of exposition and the analytic method of discovery or invention. He recalls their respective advantages by referring to the Responses to the Second Objections, and then, while saying that he would like to find a man skilled at both, he makes a choice: it is the re-exposition of Descartes' principles according to the method of the synthetic exposition, by retaining from the *Meditations* only the content, the topics [*les matières*], “the main matters,” while “leaving aside – I quote – whatever is a matter of Logic, or is recounted only historically:”<sup>23</sup> in other words, all that will be a narrative of an itinerary of discovery will be effaced. And this means not only the rejection of all autobiographical history – real or fictional – from philosophy, any relationship to the route (*chemin*), all the cartography that appears from that point on as empirical and secondary. No, not only: it is another concept of method that is put to work here. For, as we shall see, this procedure is inseparable from a critique of the cogito, doubt, freedom, the idea, the concept of the idea in Descartes, the distinction between will and understanding, and with all this the concept of fiction that is at least implicitly present in the work of Descartes. Beginning with the preface, Spinoza announces that the author (that he pretends to represent) does not think as Descartes thinks that the will is distinct from understanding and that it is free (we shall see later what the consequences of this unity of will and understanding are with regard to the very concept of method). If the will is not free and distinct from the understanding, the pretended faculty [11, 9] of affirming and denying is a pure fiction, as the preface has already said, and there is nothing outside of the ideas themselves. It follows naturally that the entire Cartesian procedure, in particular as it works through doubt, the suspension of judgment at the moment of the perception of an idea, that this entire procedure is already affected by fiction in the Spinozist sense and when one knows, when one sees what fiction means for Spinoza, one gauges the disastrous and ruinous consequence, in Spinoza's eyes, of this first and very precocious critique of Descartes, beginning with the preface to *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*. Descartes' whole method announces itself – especially in his analytic approach, in his research procedure which is like a fiction devoid of philosophic value, a fiction and an abstraction, for beyond the fact that the faculty of affirming and negating is a fiction, this fiction could not have been isolated, taken

for a reality apart from the ideas except by a belief in notions formed by way of abstraction, in these “notions which men have formed because they conceive things abstractly, like humanity, stone-hood, and other things of that kind.”<sup>24</sup> This critique of abstraction – which begins very early with Spinoza and in a way familiar to you in the *Ethics* – is essentially linked to the questions concerning the economy of fiction, narrative, rhetoric and the philosophy of language that interest us here. And instead of examining them in Spinoza’s later, better known, texts, I prefer to discern them at a very early moment that, apparently in the greatest proximity to Descartes, lets their premises appear, to say the least, in the most marked distance or opposition. I will limit myself, with your permission, to two themes.

1. The first theme is the one we have identified as that of the Cartesian economy, or rather the principle or properly economic axiom of the economy of Cartesian methodology, i.e. the axiom of ease [*facilité*]: the search for the easiest, the order of transition from the easier to the more difficult in order to be assured of the greatest power of what is most in my power. We have repeatedly insisted on this and I won’t come back to it; and we will ask what Descartes thought under the apparent ease [*facilité*] of thinking the easy [*facile*] which, in fact, appears to us quite enigmatic. And we [11, 10] sense in fact that all sorts of decisive stakes are lodged there; we haven’t simply intuited this, but have recognized and demonstrated it in certain passages. For what does Spinoza do even in the most docile exposition, if it can be said this way, of Descartes’ *Principles*? He adds a scholium to a certain proposition 7. And in this scholium, pretending not to understand at all what Descartes calls easy and difficult, he undertakes a pitiless examination of the whole Cartesian argument as far as it is supported by this axiom of the “easy” [*facile*]. This issue has no immediate or apparent connection with the concept of method, i.e., with the relation between methodology and the thinking of the ease [*facilité*] of the easy [*facile*] on which we have insisted, but one can transpose this critique and its radicality assures it of a general significance itself. It is in fact about a demonstration of the existence of God. Proposition 7: “The existence of God is also demonstrated from the fact that we ourselves who have an idea of him exist.”<sup>25</sup> In the scholium, Spinoza recalls that in order to demonstrate this proposition Descartes admits two axioms: “[...] (1) What can bring about the greater, or more difficult, can also bring about the lesser, (2) It is greater to create, or to preserve [*conserver*] a substance than to create or preserve the attributes,

or properties, of a substance.” And Spinoza adds: “but what he means by this I do not know. What does he call easy, and what difficult? Nothing is said to be easy or difficult absolutely, but only in relation to a cause.”<sup>6</sup> And Spinoza then adds a note: “Take as one example the spider, which easily weaves a web that men could weave only with the greatest difficulty. On the other hand, how many things do men do with the greatest ease which are perhaps impossible for angels?”<sup>7</sup>

This example of the spider becomes particularly amusing for us if we think in particular of Nietzsche’s pun on Spinoza, on the name of Spinoza, and this *Spinnen*<sup>8</sup> that indicates the gesture of the spider’s weaving, the philosophic systems, and especially if they are mathematizable [*mathématisable*] resembling a construction made by a spider’s thread (“muss es ein Bau wie aus Spinnfäden sein,” says Nietzsche).<sup>9</sup> And since I [11, 11] speak of Nietzsche it needs also to be mentioned that despite all the sarcasms against the “sick hermit” who “arms” himself and “masquerades” behind his “hocus pocus of mathematical form,”<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche had admired and owed him much, particularly certain critical schemata which we will soon encounter, and particularly the well known critiques of Descartes. Among all the attacks Nietzsche mounts against Descartes – and this is not the place to recall them – there is one that I will single out, since it appears to me strangely ill-conceived as it is stated. This is still in *Beyond Good and Evil* (§ 191). It is the moment when Nietzsche exceptionally praises the exception that Descartes, the rationalist, constitutes in the “herd” of philosophers where faith has always prevailed. And he specifies: “Descartes was an exception, as the father of rationalism (and consequently grandfather of the Revolution) who granted authority to reason alone. But reason is only a tool and Descartes was superficial.”<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche goes wrong here, for, as I have stressed several times, it is Descartes himself who defines reason as “universal instrument” and we have tried to take the measure of this instrumentalist or technical appellation in its most essential necessity, that which could link the cogito itself to method and technique. Moreover, in order to move in the triangle or circle of Descartes, Nietzsche, and Spinoza, it was the latter who had been the first – and Nietzsche hailed him for this – who criticized not only the distinction between understanding and will but the idea itself of faculty, of a separated power, in which he saw a fiction produced by abstraction. But we will return to this point. I close this arachno-Nietzschean parenthesis and return to the scholium in which, between the angels and the spider, Spinoza claims not to understand

what Descartes calls “easy and difficult.” The axiom, he says, cannot have absolute validity and cannot therefore serve any demonstration: “But if he calls difficult those things that can be accomplished [by a cause] with great labor, and easy, those that can be accomplished by the same cause with less labor – as a force which can lift 50 pounds will be able to lift 25 pounds twice as easily – then of course, [11, 12] the axiom will not be absolutely true, nor will he be able to demonstrate from it what he wants to.”<sup>12</sup> If you follow the scholium as a whole you will see that, paradoxically, Spinoza aims only at the proof in *Meditations* (III) and not the one in the *Principles* that he set out to examine, no doubt because the *Principles* don’t appeal at all here to the axiom of ease.

The first of the two themes of precocious opposition – as far as the question of method is concerned – is thus the economic theme of the economy and of ease [*facile*]. The second theme that we encounter in the *Metaphysical Thoughts* (published at the same time as *Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy* and presented as their complement), this second theme does not take the form of an objection to Descartes, as in the case of ease, but represents a systematic argument [*fait corps systématique*] and stands in essential connection with the argumentation that will represent the essential part of the anti-Cartesian strategy, i.e. the critique of abstraction and fiction, the critique of the idea of idea – like a mute and passive painting, while it is for Spinoza affirmation and that the true indicates itself – a critique therefore of a transcendentalized and abstract truth that pretends to be defined outside the sign to which it gives the true idea through itself [*qu’en donne l’idée vraie par elle-même*]. There is a true idea but there is no truth. And the truth or the true as transcendental term – in the precise and technical sense of this word in medieval thought – is an abstraction that gives rise to a belief, a fiction born from a narrative and giving rise to a purely rhetoric usage. There again is articulated a certain polemic and a certain Nietzschean strategy, in this passage of the *Metaphysical Thoughts* that criticizes or rather narrates and deconstructs the genealogical narrative of the engendering of transcendentals (the One, the True, the Good), i.e. which were defined as the most general affections of being. You will see that there exists an entire dispositif to interpret philosophical language, a dispositif to which a great future is promised and which is already present in the later works of Spinoza, for instance in the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*. I conclude today by reading this text and next time we will take up the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. [11, 13] Thus this is from chapter VI of *Metaphysical Thoughts*:

*“What the true and the false are, both among ordinary people and among Philosophers”*

To perceive these two, the *true* and the *false* rightly, we shall begin with the meaning of the words, from which it will be plain that these are only extrinsic denominations of things are not attributed to things except metaphorically. But since ordinary people first invent words, which afterwards are used by the Philosophers, it seems desirable for one seeking the original meaning of a term to ask what it first denoted among ordinary people – particularly where we lack other causes that could be used to investigate that [meaning], causes drawn from the nature of language.

The first meaning of *true* and *false* seems to have had its origin in stories: a story was called true when it was of a deed that had really happened, and false when it was of a deed that had never happened.

Afterwards the Philosophers used this meaning to denote the agreement of an idea with its object and conversely. So an idea is called true when it shows us the thing as it is in itself, and false when it shows us the thing otherwise than it really is. For ideas are nothing but narratives, *or* mental histories of nature. But later this usage was transferred metaphorically to mute things, as when we call gold true or false, as if the gold which is presented to us were to tell something of itself that either was or was not in it.

*True not a transcendental term*

So they are thoroughly deceived who judge *true* to be a transcendental term, *or* affection of being. For it can only be said improperly – or if you prefer, metaphorically – of the things themselves.

*Truth and true idea, how they differ*

If you should ask what truth is beyond a true idea, ask also what whiteness is beyond a white body. For they are related to each other in the same way. So nothing remains to be noted – even what we have said would not have been worth the trouble of noting, if writers had not so entangled themselves in trifles of this kind that afterwards they have not been able to untangle themselves, finding difficulties where none exist.

*What are the properties of truth? Certainty is not in things*

The properties of truth, or of a true idea, are (1) that it is clear and distinct, and (2) that it removes all doubt, *or* in a word, that it is certain. Those who seek certainty in the things themselves are deceived in the same way as when they seek truth in them. And although we say that the thing is uncertain, this is a figure of speech which takes the object for the idea. In the same way we call a thing doubtful, except perhaps that then we understand by uncertainty contingency, or a thing which inspires uncertainty or doubt in us.<sup>13</sup>

All this is not directly and explicitly aimed against Descartes, and in certain respects this supposes a certain Cartesian problematic, a certain return to the cogito and to the idea, even as this strategy is ready to be turned against Descartes, against the hyperbolic doubt that can only be a rhetorical fiction seeking the truth elsewhere than in the intrinsic sign given by the idea, against a method that permanently supposes a certain passive and mute idea, the understanding a thing distinct from the will. The entire Cartesian itinerary (the entire *ordo inveniendi*, all that occurs

by way of meditation, the narrative of the autobiographical-philosophic itinerary, not to mention what we have said about the “novel” [*roman*] in previous lectures [)], all of this is already threatened by the Spinozist premises, from the moment that is apparently and slyly given as if it were a simple initial and preliminary repetition of Cartesianism in this first work. But it is obviously in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* that the methodology begins to emerge as such.

### Lecture 12

[12, 1] The great alternative when one speaks of method is the alternative between “before” and “after.” I have a purpose in naming it so crudely and in temporal terms, whereas the order of the before and the after can be here completely other than temporal (for example, logical, as one says, or ontological). My reference to the opposition before/after is all the more crude in that slightest attention to time and to the value of order leads to making the distinction between before and after something other than an opposition of one term against another; and above all, concerning method, we can easily see that that the alternative is difficult rigorously to maintain. Nevertheless, as it has appearance in its favor, it is better to begin by recognizing these so-called appearances. Why before and after? Although, as we have frequently repeated, any method implies an iterative structure, a structure of repeatability, the rule or the system of rules regulating these repetitions can be produced, defined, and proposed before or after the act, if we can put it this way. One can either judge that it is necessary to begin by having a method, a good and true method of knowledge before proceeding to knowledge, before seeking and finding, and in this case, the method comes *before* the act, the instrument is independent of the content and precedes it. It is formal and subjective. Or we are constrained to consider that the act of knowledge is already possible and completed, and that only the content can help us to define a method. The latter is then no longer prior to but is instead the effect of knowledge, of an already completed act. In this second case the method that is neither formal nor subjective, nor even truly instrumental, is a reflection, the second and reflexive moment of a knowledge that has already taken place. Only prior access to the truth can instruct us about the instrument of access to the truth. Any hypothesis concerning a method in which the act and ef-

fectivity of knowing would proceed from a void, and thus any hypothesis of a pre-liminary method would be a pure fiction, the hypothesis of a [12, 2] fiction, and philosophical incoherence.

Such in sum would be the matrix of Spinoza's objections to Descartes. We will try to reconstruct the system around this other concept of method. Its core proposition is simply the reflective character of method as it is posited and argued at the center of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Before reconstructing its movement I will cite, I will recite the well known passage: "From this it may be inferred that Method is nothing but a reflexive knowledge, or an idea of an idea (*Unde colligitur, Methodum nihil aliud esse nisi cognitionem reflexivam, aut ideam ideae*); and because there is no idea of an idea, unless there is first an idea, there will be no Method unless there is first an idea. So that method will be good which shows how the mind is to be directed (*quomodo mens dirigenda sit*) according the standard [*la norme*] of a given true idea."<sup>14</sup> In other words, what is first given, that which is necessary to any beginning and from which alone one can begin that is the true idea (we will see what this means later) and how this true idea itself presents its norm and its sign in itself, even that which permits it to be perceived by a sign intrinsic to it as true idea and constitutes it from this fact as norm, as right rule, as model, and method will be precisely nothing other than the reflection of the idea, true in its norm, the idea of the idea, the idea reflecting the idea.

This is well known. Before simultaneously exploring the formation and the consequences of this concept of method, especially the effects of its rupture with Cartesianism, I would like to underline, with regard to two or three points at least, the paradox of certain continued traits, traits of continuity.

First, of course, the motif of the way [*la voie*]: even if one can consider it a kind of metaphor effaced (precisely through repetition), a figure without true philosophical bearing (which I don't believe), this motif of the *via* remains very active and present in the text and in what one might too quickly call Spinoza rhetorics. [12, 3] The *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* bearing even in its title a reference to *via* that did not appear in Descartes' titles. I recall the full title of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect: Tractatus de intellectus emendatione et de via qua in veram rerum cognitionem dirigitur*. That henceforth in some sense the way [*la voie*] precedes the method, that the route cleared [*chemin frayé*] precedes the methodical [*méthodique*] map, the mapping [*cartographie*]



of the routes [*chemins*] to be repeated does not prevent but, on the contrary, only makes the figure of the routing [*cheminement*] more urgent. If we wish to be schematic, we might say that what Spinoza judges absurd and in any case purely fictional is a preliminary and formal method that would trace in some sense all the routes and the map itself before possessing any knowledge or intelligence [*reconnaissance*] concerning the terrain, lands or sites to be cleared or made accessible. A synthetic method is also a method that establishes order in a past clearing [*frayage passé*] and organizes the map of iterations, itineraries, and iterations after having already moved through it in some way. Not that the method is simply retroactive [*après coup*], and to say that it is reflexive does not mean that it simply comes after but that it cannot separate itself from the act or the operation of knowledge even in its content. This is the great tradition of thinking about method illustrated in different ways by Hegel as well as Bergson. For both, method cannot precede formally or subjectively the being-known [*être-connu*] but constitutes the very act and content of a knowledge that is at the same knowing knowledge and known knowledge. Let us leave these anticipations aside for a moment.

Spinoza thus practices the motif of the way [*la voie*] to the same extent as Descartes, but differently, in insisting on the reflexive character of method when it regulates itself according to the norm of the true idea. One could say that the true idea shows the way [*la voie*], the norm of the route [*chemin*], and the method, the becoming-method [*devenir-méthode*] of the way [*la voie*] is, itself, reflexive, a reflection on the way that the idea has shown. Of course, it would be unjust and simplistic to say that the Cartesian concept of method is purely and simply preliminary, subjective, and formal. It must presuppose certain knowledge [12, 4] – even if only the axioms of natural light – in order to begin a methodological reflection, to define the rules of method and to undertake a process that will reconstitute through the method of doubt, up to its hyperbolic phase, the entire chain of certainties. Nonetheless, for Spinoza this methodological circuit occurs through a purely fictional doubt, an effect of imagination without philosophical value. [...]

[12, 8] I would like to pause here again on the word and concept of instrument that, as much as the word “easy” in the course of certain previous trajectories, localizes a certain weight, a certain bearing of the problem of the method. There, too, a certain continuity with the Cartesian movement clearly marks under or despite ruptures and oppositions, something

like a mutual belonging. Descartes said, for example, that reason is a universal instrument that allows us to think the homogeneity between the thought of the rational and the thought of the technical but also – because of the universality [12, 9] of this instrument, a certain meta-technicity [*méta-technicité*]. Reason, an instrument that is not constructed by human technology, was also meta-technology, a unique instrument different from any other, the instrument of instruments. Which makes the rational method something technical and meta-technical. The matter is continued and radically systematized in Spinoza who often speaks of “innate instruments.” For instance, at the end of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, he calls the properties of our understanding “innate instruments,” interrupts the book at its very end and says [:] “We shall, therefore, enumerate the properties of the intellect here, and consider them, and begin to deal with our innate tools (*nostris innatis instrumentis agere incipiamus*).”<sup>15</sup> It is clear that the word “instruments” designates at once the tool [*l’outil*], and we will verify this, in the most current sense, and at the same time, when it is about innate instruments, structures, structured power, instruction as structure, although not in the sense of a faculty or a general power (Spinoza has always criticized the possibility of such things as abstract entities as products of the imagination). Further on,<sup>16</sup> he even defined the true idea, one whose truth is *index sui* and announces itself as such by an intrinsic denomination and defined the true idea as an innate instrument. There is in us an innate instrument that is the true idea that constitutes at the same time a norm with the help of which we can construct a method that is nothing other than the idea of this idea, the instrumental reflection, the reflexive knowledge of the innate instrument. I quote this passage:

From this you will easily understand [*facile intelligatur*] how the mind, as it understands more things, at the same time acquires other tools, with which it proceeds to understand more easily [*facilius pergat intelligere*]. For, as may be inferred from what has been said, before all else [*ante omnia*] there must be a true idea in us as an inborn tool [*tanquam innatum instrumentum*]; once this true idea is understood, we understand [*simul: comment on it*]<sup>17</sup> the difference between that kind of perception and all the rest. Understanding that difference constitutes one part of the Method.<sup>18</sup>

[12, 10] The necessity of these instruments innate in us is what escapes both the circle as well as infinite regression in the constitution of a method. It is with regard to this infinite regression – that had been lying in wait for Descartes and that Spinoza wants to avoid – that the question of the

instrument is elaborated, and especially the analogy between acquired instrumentality (artefactual, in the current sense, the instrumentality of technical tools) on the one hand, and the innate instrumentality [on the other] is posited or presupposed, and it is obviously this analogy that sustains the technical essence of this entire methodology. What, in fact, does Spinoza say?

He had just said<sup>19</sup> that one has to treat the way and the method after or according to [après ou d'après] the true idea and the most certain mode of knowledge. He specifies that it is in some sense necessary to the constitution of the method to advance and not to regress to infinity. The risk lies in seeking the best method to define the best method to seek the truth. And so on to infinity. One would never know anything in this way and this is exactly the risk Descartes runs according to Spinoza. Here then is the analogy posited twice by Spinoza. To forge the iron one needs a hammer and to have a hammer one has first to forge iron. For this one would need another hammer and instruments. Consequently, if one were to entrust oneself to this logic one could not understand how human beings were able to forge iron and have hammers. But the fact is that human beings did forge iron and did have the use of hammers. Similarly, on the following page, there is the same recourse to the fact from which any method must begin: in a parenthesis Spinoza says (*because we have a true idea, habemus enim ideam veram*):

A true idea (for we have a true idea) is something different from its object. For a circle is one thing and an idea of the circle another.<sup>20</sup>

Here now, for the second time, the analogy is stated in the pure rhetorical form of a “just as ... in the same way”:  
[12, 11]

[31] But just as men, in the beginning, were able to make the easiest things with the tools they were born with [Derrida adds: or inborn, *innatis instrumentis*] (however laboriously and imperfectly), and once these had been made, made other, more difficult things with less labor and more perfectly, [Derrida adds: still a techno-economic model], and so [sic etiam], proceeding gradually from the simplest works to tools, and from tools to other works and tools, reached the point where they accomplished so many and so difficult things with little labor, in the same way the intellect, by its inborn power [vi sua nativa],<sup>21</sup> makes intellectual tools for itself, by which it acquires other powers for other intellectual works,<sup>22</sup> and from these other works still other tools, or the power of searching further, and so proceeds by stages, until it reaches the pinnacle of wisdom.

[32] It will be easy to see that this is the situation of the intellect, provided we understand what the Method of seeking the truth is (quid sit Methodus verum investigandi), and what those inborn tools are, which it requires only.<sup>23</sup>

It is not a question of transposing a technical model – in the usual sense (the iron and the hammer) – to the understanding, a model that is in principle sensible to an intellectual or intelligible structure, but rather of recalling that even the technical capacity, that of the body, is first parallel, in that it supposes an innate power [puissance], to that of an intellectual instrumentality.

I would like now – that is the program of our seminar – to extract a passage that is not in itself obvious between Spinoza's methodological procedure and his philosophy of the sign and the system of language [langue].

To take up those things closest to what concerns us at the moment in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, let us first see what it says about the sign.

[12, 12] First of all, you have noted that the knowledge by signs and especially by arbitrary signs was situated at the lowest level in the hierarchy of the modes of perception – or knowledge, at least in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, where Spinoza moreover speaks explicitly about the arbitrariness of the sign, this arbitrariness consisting precisely in the passivity of the sign, on the side of contingency and of insignificance proper: “There is the Perception we have from report (ex auditu) or from some conventional sign (aut ex aliquo signo, quod vocant ad placitum, habemus).”<sup>24</sup>

In the *Ethics* (2E40PSch2), knowledge by signs also pertains to the first kind of knowledge that is itself divided in two: 1) vague experience (the second according to the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*) and then 2) knowledge on the basis of signs: by hearing or reading certain words, Spinoza says, we remember things (the link between sign and memory, a persistent theme up to Hegel) and form certain ideas that resemble those by which we imagine the things. And here Spinoza refers to the scholium of proposition 18 [of the *Ethics* part 2] that is precisely a scholium about memory. We must stop here for a moment in order to better understand the Spinozist concept of the sign. It is in the description of the concatenation proper to memory that Spinoza gives examples of the arbitrariness of the sign, especially the linguistic sign. It is necessary to

stress that this concatenation is not a concatenation of an intellectual order, of the understanding, but the order and concatenation of the affections of the human body. The sign is of the order of memory – or the imagination, as we will see in a moment – and the affections of the human body. This alone explains for Spinoza the arbitrariness of the sign and the fact for example – this is his example – that through concatenation, with the aid of signs, we pass from the thought of one thing to the thought of another that has no resemblance to that which precedes it: for example, for the Roman, from the thought of the word *pomum* to the thought of a fruit that has no resemblance with the spoken sound. A fact of memory, the Roman has so often been affected [12, 13] by two things and by the association of the two things, that the two images have been associated and ordered one to the other in his body (thus, imagination and memory). And each individual can have his own associations, different associations based on the same sign. For example, a horse's tracks in the sand: a soldier will think of a knight and of war, a peasant of the plow and of a field. As the knowledges of the first kind (opinion, imagination, memory) are “the sole cause of falseness” (2E41P), you see that all that pertains to the semiotic order is a priori [*d'avance*] suspect and inferior, and a method that seeks the truth must avoid it as much and also as rigorously as possible. The sign – and therefore language [*langue*] – do not arise from the intellect, from intellectual concatenation [*enchainement*]. The reform of or the medicine for the understanding must also cure itself of signs and of language. Good.

From this we now pass on to an apparently different use of the word “sign” but one that confirms a depth, a depth entirely commensurate with and essential to what we have just said.

In a long paragraph of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, one that precisely presents method as a reflexive knowledge of the idea, the idea of the idea, Spinoza demonstrates in sum 1) that “the truth does not need any sign” (*veritas nullo eget signo*) and [2]) that the method that consists in looking for the sign and the truth *after* the acquisition of ideas (I will comment on this “after” later ...) is not the true method.<sup>25</sup> In these two propositions, sign does not mean sign in the sense of a linguistic sign or a sign belonging to a semiotic system but only the external index [*indice*] of the thing itself that signals the thing, the index [*index*], but an index that as sign (and here we return to the general sense of which we have just spoken) would be extrinsic, exterior to the thing itself, in short, a sign of the true that would not be the true itself, that is, as Spinoza says, “index

sui”: a sign that refers to nothing but itself is no sign, but is a manifestation. I refer here to book 2 of the *Ethics*, proposition 43, demonstration and scholium, on the true idea. [12, 14] When I have a true idea, I know at the same time that I have a true idea and cannot doubt it. Someone who has a false idea or who dreams can believe he has a true idea and is awake but whoever has a true idea and is awake cannot doubt it. This pertains, this self-manifestation, on the nature of the idea that is not, as Descartes believed it, a representation in the sense of a painting on a canvass, a mute object like a painting on a canvass (*quid mutum instar picturae in tabula*), but a mode of thinking, the act of knowing or of understanding itself, an affirmation certain of itself.

The truth does not need therefore any sign, in the sense of an exterior sign, any marker that would not be its own manifestation in action [*en acte*]. And the method must regulate itself according to the structure of the true idea and certainty of the truth that has no need of any sign, other than the possession of the true idea itself. This is what Descartes who would have sought to guarantee the idea or the truth of the idea, or the certainty of the truth by something other than itself by proposing all the detours with which you are familiar, by way of method, criteriology, hyperbolic doubt, etc. would not have understood. In sum, the Cartesian method – at the point where we are – would be subjected not only to a fiction but to the sign – i.e. to memory and to imagination. This would, paradoxically, be a philosophy of the sign, nothing more than a philosophy of the sign and of language that could not think its own subjection to the sign, to linguistic structure [*langue*], and to language.

How does Spinoza demonstrate that “the truth does not need any sign” to manifest itself as such? He invokes the very structure of the idea, of the true idea. Proceeding from the fact – as we have seen – and every method has to proceed from this fact without which it would not proceed at all, it would have no route [*chemin*] open or to open or to follow – in order for us to have a true idea we have to admit that an idea is different from that of which it is the idea, i.e. its ideatum. The idea of the circle is not a circle, has no center or periphery, and the idea of a body is not a body. [12, 15] But as the idea of the body or the circle is neither body nor circle, it is in itself intelligible. In its formal essence, it can be the object of another idea in its objective essence (I remind you that the objective essence of an idea is this idea insofar as it includes in itself an object, it is if you will the relationship to the object of the idea – this is for example the circle not in

itself but as the content of the idea of the circle; now the idea of the circle that has the real circle (ideatum [*idéat*]) insofar as it is represented as its objective essence or its objective reality in the idea, the idea of the circle has also its reality or its formal essence, i.e. its being as idea, its act as idea is not reducible to its objective essence, i.e. to what it represents. The idea is a reality, it has a formal essence. And the formal essence of the idea – that is intelligible – can become in turn an object of another idea of which it would be the objective essence. There thus exists the real circle (ideatum [*idéat*]), the idea of the circle that has the circle as its objective essence but that also has its own formal essence that can become the objective essence of another idea, the idea of the idea of the circle. Spinoza takes the example of Peter. *Peter est quid reale*, something real but I have also a true idea of Peter, that is his objective essence in me and this idea of Peter that is not Peter also has its formal essence that can become the intelligible object of another idea, an idea of an idea and so on ad infinitum. Everybody can produce this experience when they see themselves knowing [*lorsqu'il se voit savoir*], says Spinoza (*videt se scire*) *quid sit Petrus* and when they know themselves knowing (*scire se scire*), and know that they themselves know, etc. Naturally, in the opposite way it is clear by the same token that I don't need this infinite regression to know Peter. To know (*connaître*) Peter himself it is not necessary to understand the idea of Peter and even less the idea of the idea of Peter. To know I don't need to know that I know or that I know that I know, any more than to know the essence of the triangle I need to know the essence of the circle. The essence of the triangle is as different, as heterogeneous in relation to the essence of the circle, as Peter in relation to the idea of Peter, that is [12, 16] certain. And this pertains to what in Peter or the triangle or the circle themselves are not ideas. But when it is a matter of understanding ideas, this is not the case. To understand Peter I don't need to understand the idea of Peter. But to understand the idea, to know the idea, it is necessary that I know, to know that I know it is first necessary that I know. And thus certainty is nothing more than the objective essence itself, the manner by which we perceive [*sentir*] its formal essence. In order thus to have certainty of the truth we don't need any sign but instead to possess the idea itself. Outside of the one who has the adequate idea or the objective essence of something, no one can know what supreme certainty is, i.e. establish a criteriology and an abstract and universal methodology, exterior to the act itself of perceiving the idea. Certainty and objective essence are the same thing. The truth has no need

for any sign; it is enough to immediately abolish doubt without the interminable detours of the Cartesian method to possess the objective essences of things. Thus, Spinoza concludes, the method that consists in looking for the sign of truth *after* the acquisition of ideas is not the true (method) but the true method is the way (*via*) by which the truth itself or the objective essences of things or, again, the ideas (all these terms *signify* the same thing) are found in the requisite order. I would like to linger on this proposition that is, I think, a bit difficult. When Spinoza says that the method which consists in looking for the sign of truth after the acquisition of ideas is not the true method he has Descartes in mind, of course, who, you remember, for instance, in the *Discourse on Method* with a typical gesture, pretends to determine the sign by which one recognizes the truth, and to formulate a general criterion that is transposable to other examples – like a general and exterior norm –; thus, for example when he says:

After this, I considered generally what in proposition is requisite in order to be true and certain; for since I had just discovered one which I [12, 17] knew to be such, I thought that I ought also to know in what this certainty consisted. And having remarked that there was nothing at all in the statement “I think, therefore I am” which assures me of having thereby made a true assertion, excepting that I see very clearly that to think it is necessary to be, I came to the conclusion that I might assume, as a general rule, that the things which we conceive very clearly and distinctly are all true – remembering, however, that there is some difficulty in ascertaining which are those that we distinctly conceive.<sup>26</sup>

Descartes thus, in a gesture that is renewed in the *Meditations* tries to draw a general rule of certainty and truth after the fact [*après coup*] as Spinoza says, after the acquisition of certain ideas. It is true that if one would like to defend Descartes here and elsewhere against Spinoza’s accusations there would be much, much to say and to refine in many respects. I cannot do this here but I would like at least to indicate the principle of a response to Spinoza’s objection. It is for example in the *Third Meditation* that Descartes [says] that the ideas in themselves could not be false and bear within themselves their proper criteriology, not only because, as you just have heard, a clear and distinct idea cannot be false but also because, by virtue of the distinction between understanding and will that Spinoza responds that an idea, a thing of the understanding, is never false in itself, but is always certain, provided that one is not concerned with the relationship between its objective reality and its ideatum [*idéat*]. The idea of a chimaera is certain as an idea, it is certain that I have the idea of a chimaera



and phenomenologically it is true and certain that I see yellow, Descartes says elsewhere; when I am jaundiced. It is only when the will intervenes in the judgment to relate this idea to exterior reality that I can be in the false [*dans le faux*] by saying, for example, that the world is yellow or that the chimaera exists outside myself. But let us set aside a debate that would lead us too far away from concerns of this seminar. What I wanted to focus on is this: when Spinoza says that method does not have to seek the sign of truth *after* the acquisition of ideas, this is not at all a contradiction, despite a certain [12, 18] appearance, given the definition of the method as reflexive knowledge or the idea of the idea. The reflexivity here is not secondarity [secondarité], that which follows the acquisition of the idea, but only the fact that method supposes a certain structure of the idea and a certain fact of the idea. There is a true idea and method merely reflects without requiring any inference or any sign of what the true idea is. Method consists, Spinoza says literally, in

understanding what a true idea is by distinguishing it from the rest of the perceptions; by investigating its nature [*ejusque naturam investigando*], so that from that we may come to know our power of understanding and so restrain the mind that it understands, according to that standard [*ad illam normam*], everything that is to be understood; and finally by teaching and constructing certain rules as aids [*auxilia*], so that the mind does not weary itself in useless things.

[38] From this it may be inferred that Method is nothing but a reflexive knowledge, or an idea of an idea; and because there is no idea of an idea, unless there is first an idea, there will be no Method unless there is first an idea.<sup>27</sup>

(Auxiliaries of the method are not the essence of the method.)

The great principle of this method is thus that method cannot be at the beginning [*au principe*] and that it is only by way of a fiction of imagination that one would want to begin with the method.

The main consequence for the order of philosophical thought: since the method has to regulate itself on the basis of the idea, on the norm of the true idea, the most perfect method would be the one that bases itself on the norm of the idea of the most perfect being. The relationship between the ideas is in fact the same as the relationship between the formal essences of these ideas, and the reflexive knowledge of the idea of the absolutely perfect being would be superior to the reflexive knowledge of any other idea. This explains in principle why the true, most methodical philosophical discourse does not begin with the exposition of an antecedent method, but with the

idea of God. That is what makes the *Ethics*, in a manner commensurate with what we have just said, begin with God and [12, 19] dispensing with any exposition of an antecedent Method. The first book, Of God, inaugurates method and content at the same time, and they accompany each according to an order, the best order.

So, how do we explain that before the *Ethics* there was the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*; a treatise on method that begins by explaining that one should not and moreover cannot begin with Method and does so by beginning with a more or less fictional narrative? Is there an incoherence in the fact that this lack of order explains what a good order would be? Is Hegel *mutatis mutandis*, who also postulates that Method should not be an already existing tool and must lose itself in the movement of thought and the process of the idea, not more coherent in his exposition of his concept of Method at the end of his Great Logic? We will speak of this next time by investigating precisely the structure of the fiction and of the sign that would explain these paradoxes of order, for example in what the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* says about fiction and the negative nouns born from imagination (in-finity, uncorporeal etc.) that have usurped the positive nouns that alone would pertain to the perfect being; and then also by studying this philosophy and this politics of signs, of the system of language [langue] and of rhetoric in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

(translated by Willi Goetschel and Warren Montag)

### *Translators' Notes*

- 1 The translation is based on Derrida's typescript of the lectures "La Langue et le Discours de la Méthode." The translation does not include handwritten notes found in the margins. While some of these may have been intended as emendations, others were commentary or directions for reading the text aloud and a significant number were illegible. Given these difficulties, they have not been translated. Numbers in brackets refer to the lecture, followed by the page number of the manuscript in the Archive of the Special Collection of the Library of the University of California. When appropriate the French is given in brackets. All comments in brackets in Derrida's text are by the translators. Derrida often gives in his lecture the Latin phrasing when quoting Spinoza. These additions to the English translation of the quotations from Spinoza are set in brackets.
- 2 *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), vol. 1, 229. Derrida quotes from the introduction to *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* written by the editor, Derrida takes to be Spinoza.

- 3 *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 228.
- 4 *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 230.
- 5 *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 247.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 248.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Following Nietzsche Derrida uses the German verb “spinnen” of the spider, for which the German word is “Spinne.”
- 9 Friedrich Nietzsche, Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne, in Friedrich Montinari, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, de Gruyter and Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980, vol. 1, 882. English translation in On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense, in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale, New Jersey, Humanities Press and Sussex, Harvester Press, 1979, 79-91, 85: “his construction must be like one constructed of spiders' webs.”
- 10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, part 1, § 5, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.
- 11 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 5, § 191, 81.
- 12 *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 248.
- 13 *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 312f.
- 14 *Spinoza, Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect*, § 38, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 19.
- 15 *Spinoza, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §107, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 43.
- 16 B. de Spinoza, *Traité de la réforme de l'entendement*, ed. and trans. A. Koyré (Paris: Vrin, 6th ed., 1979, French trans. 30, Latin: 31, §39; *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 19.
- 17 This is Derrida's insert. Curley does not render Spinoza's “simul” explicitly, for instance with “at the same time.” The simultaneity that Spinoza suggests is a point however that Derrida made a note to comment.
- 18 *Spinoza, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, § 39, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 19
- 19 Derrida refers to the French edition, see *Spinoza, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, § 30, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 16.
- 20 *Spinoza, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §33, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 17.
- 21 Spinoza adds a footnote here not included in Derrida's quote: “By inborn power I understand what is not caused in us by external causes. I shall explain this afterwards in my Philosophy.”
- 22 Spinoza's footnote not included in Derrida's quote: “Here they are called works. In my Philosophy, I shall explain what the are.”
- 23 *Spinoza, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §§31-32, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 17.
- 24 *Spinoza, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §19.1, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 12.

- 25 Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, § 36, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 18.
- 26 Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Rosse, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973, 101f.
- 27 Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §§37-38, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 18f.