

J. S. DELMEDIGO AS TEACHER OF SPINOZA:
THE CASE OF NONCOMPLEX PROPOSITIONS

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It was suggested as long ago as 1940, in a paper by J. d'Ancona, that some of Spinoza's ideas were drawn from the works of Joseph Solomon Delmedigo. Critical reception of d'Ancona's paper has been mixed.¹ Though the details of D'Ancona's argument may well be called into question, his conclusion – the influence of Delmedigo on Spinoza – may be accepted. In other papers² I have argued that there is indeed a connection between the two writers; in particular, that Spinoza borrowed his scheme of epistemological categories from Delmedigo, and that by comparing the two we can gain a better understanding of Spinoza. The borrowed ideas are, however, among the less original thoughts of Delmedigo. Spinoza might have gleaned similar ideas from the works of others – from Franciscus van den Enden, Juan de Prado, or Saadia Gaon,³ though the agreement is not as precise nor as detailed as with Delmedigo. It is principally on the basis of more or less irrelevant details common to both Spinoza and Delmedigo that we can establish the source of the Spinozistic doctrines in question: Delmedigo and Spinoza both use the same example to illustrate the epistemological categories and cite the same proposition of Euclid in discussing the example. These commonalities are too striking to be coincidental.

This influence of Delmedigo on Spinoza is no doubt interesting, but is this interest only antiquarian? The previous papers prove only that Spinoza found in Delmedigo's book, *Sefer 'Elim*, a convenient compendium of modern science and philosophy, things that were well known to many and available in other works. They do not prove that Delmedigo had any great influence on Spinoza's own ideas. It would be as if I were to consult and cite John Doe's popular contemporary textbook of logic. A curious biographer might be find it worth noting that I

¹ V. Révah 1959: 17; Vries 1970, 28-29, 35; Levy 1989: 25-26, 48, 84; Kaplan 2000: 253; M 377.

² V. Adler 1999 and Adler unpublished paper..

³ On Van den Enden and De Prado, v. my forthcoming paper. On Saadia, see Saadia Gaon, *Emunot ve-De'ot*, Author's Introduction §5 / Saadia 1562/1948: 16-26. I thank Heidi Ravven for this last reference. Saadia's book would have been available to Spinoza as Saadia 1562/1647.

owned and used Doe's textbook, but one could hardly say that Doe had any great influence on me. Indeed, Delmedigo's works have reputation for lack of originality: in many ways he was a mere reporter of facts and theories that were innovated by others.⁴ It is conceivable that Spinoza used Delmedigo's books, rather than those of others, merely because Delmedigo wrote in Hebrew, a language more familiar to the young Spinoza than the Latin of the non-Jewish European intellectual world of his time.⁵

In this paper I propose to refute this possibility: I propose to show that Delmedigo in fact had a profound and important influence on Spinoza, that Delmedigo was the source of one of Spinoza's key insights.

Delmedigo's *Sefer 'Elim* indeed does not claim originality for most of its contents. There are, however, some exceptions. In the section called *Ner 'Elohim* ("The Lamp of God") we encounter the remarkable passage cited below. Delmedigo first outlines the then conventional view⁶ of the nature of propositions:⁷

When a person intelligizes [*mas, kil*] the sensibilia abstracted from all matter, perceiving their essence [*mahut*],⁸ but not making any affirmation or negation regarding them, neither compounding one with another nor separating one from another, this [operation] is called the first operation of the intellect, or simple apprehension [*havanah peshutah*].⁹ That is to say, [the person] discerns whether the thing is a substance or an accident, [gaining knowledge of] the definition or essence of the matter. The doctrines and theorems pertaining to this [kind of] apprehension are found

⁴ Barzilay 1974: 149, 219.

⁵ Or perhaps it was simply more acceptable to read Delmedigo in an environment where the reading of non-Jewish philosophers might have raised suspicions.

⁶ This conventional view is described in Nuchelmans 1983, pp. 9-16.

⁷ In translating the passages from Delmedigo, I have been forced to resort to paraphrase to a greater extent than is my custom and preference, since in the original text, the whole passage translated here consists of one long sentence – or, more accurately, Delmedigo does not write in sentences. A more literal translation would be convoluted to an extent that is incompatible with English syntax. If I were to try to preserve the structure of the original, the passage beginning "You should be aware" and extending to "some is simple and some is complex" would have to be translated as one long sentence, as follows:

"You should be aware that although Aristotle wrote in the *Rhetoric Rhetoric*, ch. 1, that truth and falsity do not apply at all to this [kind of] conception . . . , nevertheless, of the truth that is in the intellect, some is simple and some is complex."

⁸ "Quiddity" would be a more precise etymological translation.

⁹ *Havanah* would more commonly be translated as "understanding," but Delmedigo's subsequent usage of the word requires a translation of "conceiving," "conception," "apprehension," or something of the sort. Cf. the use of the word in Ps. 33:15. The Thomistic term is *apprehensio simplex* (Nuchelmans 1983, p. 9) or *intelligentia indivisibilium* (Nuchelmans 1983, p. 14). Delmedigo is no doubt following the model of the philosophers' use of the Latin term *intelligo* and its cognates. Though this Latin verb is usually translated as "to understand" (Heb., *hevin*), its cognates often bear such meanings as "idea," "thought," "that which is conceivable," etc. See Nuchelmans 1973, index, s.vv. *intellectio*–*intelligibile*.

in the *Isagoge* of Porphyry and the *Ten Categories* of Aristotle and the *Book of Definition* of Boëthius.¹⁰ You should be aware, [however,] that [we cannot agree with the usual doctrine on this subject, as expressed, for example, by] the Philosopher [Aristotle, who] wrote in the *Rhetoric*, ch. 1, that truth and falsity do not apply at all to this [kind of] apprehension. Likewise in ch. 6 of the *Metaphysics*, §6¹¹ [he writes,] “Truth and falsity do not apply to simple things” – for truth and falsity are dependent on the judgment of the intellect, which asserts or denies, joining one thing with another or separating one from another, thereby forming affirmative or negative propositions. For after the intellect knows two separate things by way of this first [kind of] apprehension, it asserts by the judgment of its thoughts [*ra'yonav*] that *this* characterizes *that* throughout its whole species, thus being a subject for it, [the intellect] thus forms a general affirmative proposition. And if it applies to only some of its genus, i.e., [some of its] individuals, [the intellect] forms a particular [affirmative proposition]. If it judges that [the predicate] does not apply to [the subject] at all, then it will be a general negative [proposition]. If [it judges that] the predicate [fails to apply] to some of [the genus] it will be a particular negative [proposition]. This then is the second intellectual operation, whose principles are explained in the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle and in the *Book of Composition and Separation* [*Sefer ha-Harkavah veva-H, iluk*]¹² of Boëthius. This [operation] is also known among the logicians as *complex apprehension* [*havanah murkevut*]. But to the first [kind] of apprehension there pertains neither assertion and denial (*'imut u-me'un*) nor truth and falsity. (Delmedigo 1629: 1:54)

Delmedigo then takes the unusual step of expressing his own view, dissenting from the received opinion:

Nevertheless, [of] the truth that is in the intellect, some is simple and some is complex. Examples of the complex: If I conceive that man is in animal, it is true; if [I conceive] that man is a fish, it is false. Examples of the simple: If I

¹⁰ V. Porphyry 2003; *Categoriae*, ch. 2-4 / Aristotle 1928: 1:1^a-1^b; Boëthius, *Liber de Diffinitione* [sic] in *Patrologia Latina* 64: 891-910.

¹¹ Delmedigo usually cites the works of Aristotle by citing the chapters and subdivisions as found in the Juntine Aristotle, i.e., Aristotle 1562. In this case, his citation seems to be erroneous, since the passage is found in §8. See Aristotle 1562, 8:151g-152c.

¹² I.e., *De Topicis Differentiis*. Though I have found no reference to a Hebrew book by the name of *Sefer ha-Harkavah veva-H, iluk* – no such work is mentioned in Steinschneider's *Hebraeischen Übersetzungen* – it can scarcely be doubted that the work intended is in fact the *De Topicis Differentiis*. The latter became the medieval *locus classicus* for defining the term “proposition.” As Gabriël Nuchelmans writes, “[Boëthius'] definition of a proposition as a sequence of words signifying something true or false (*oratio verum valsumve significans*) became classical in the Middle Ages, the more so as it was taken over by Petrus Hispanus in his very influential *Tractatus or Summulae logicales*.” Nuchelmans cites Boëthius' definition as being found in *De Topicis Differentiis* in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne 64:1174b and 1177c (Nuchelmans 1980, p. 9 and n.1 there). The cited passages are translated in Boëthius 1978, pp. 30, 34. One might have expected that the Hebrew title, *Ha-Harkavah veva-*

H, iluk, i.e., “composition and division,” (or, perhaps, “synthesis and analysis”) referred to Boëthius' *De Divisione*, but a glance at the latter (Boëthius 1998) reveals that it has no connection with the topic at hand. Much of what Delmedigo puts forward in the cited passage, and not merely the definition of “proposition,” can be found in *De Topicis Differentiis*, pp. 1173d-1175d (Boëthius 1978, pp.30-32).

conceive of a man, I am conceiving of something that exists, so it is true; and if I conceive of a vacuum, which does not exist, I am conceiving of something false. For in the first case, the concept agrees with reality, and in the second, it does not. Hence the philosophers say that complex truth cannot be attributed to simple things, [and in so saying they are correct]; but *simple* truth can indeed be attributed to them.¹³ (Delmedigo 1629: 1:54-55).

Now, there are two points to be noted: First, noncomplex concepts (such as “man” or “fish”) can be true or false. Secondly, it would appear that this is so because acts of apprehension intrinsically involve assertion or denial (*'imut* or *me'un*). That is, if I contemplate the whiteness of snow, I am actually asserting (or denying) that snow is white, not merely entertaining the possibility that snow is white.

Now, the view that there can be noncomplex propositions is not entirely unprecedented, but the conventional wisdom was overwhelmingly to the contrary. Propositions that appear to be noncomplex were generally understood to be elliptical. Thus, for example, if we say “It is raining” (a single word in Greek or Latin), we really mean “Zeus is raining”; if we say *legitur*, we really mean *lectio fit*, i.e., “reading takes place.” A few thinkers, such as Dionysius Thrax, taught the opposite, but they are a distinct minority. (Nuchelmans 1973: 95-96; 1980: 23).

Similarly, the conventional wisdom would have us distinguish between merely *apprehending* a proposition and *asserting or denying* it (Nuchelmans 1980: 74-76), a distinction that Delmedigo rejects. In this case, as contrasted with the previous one, the conventional wisdom is not quite so unanimously held, for Aristotle himself seems not to distinguish between conceiving of a proposition and accepting or rejecting it (Nuchelmans 1973: 28-29). But by Delmedigo’s time the consensus was otherwise.

Delmedigo thus seems to leave us no way of merely contemplating a proposition, without asserting its truth or falsity. It appears that we cannot suspend our judgment. If Delmedigo were to change his mind about even one of the two points just noted, it would be different, for one could then think noncomplex thoughts without or asserting or denying them, or one could combine them

¹³ Delmedigo goes on to consider an objection: if a simple concept were true or false, then knowledge of the true and false would be in the senses, which is clearly incorrect, since the senses themselves are not faculties of knowledge. This objection is raised, e.g., by St. Thomas in *De Veritate*, Q. 1, Art. 3, Reply (Thomas Aquinas 1952: 1:13-14).

without asserting or denying the result. Delmedigo blocks both of these possibilities. Delmedigo's position, moreover, relies on his assertion of two very unusual positions.

There is an obvious parallel in Spinoza's doctrine of the identity of intellect and will (E 2p49 and 2p49s). As Spinoza states in that proposition, "In the Mind there is no volition, *or* affirmation or negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea." This is one of Spinoza's most striking teachings. Contained within this doctrine is the teaching that an idea has intrinsic assertive force. What reader of Spinoza is not surprised to learn that the idea of, say, a circle necessarily affirms the existence of a circle. One who has the idea of a circle cannot simply contemplate this idea, while suspending judgment as to the existence of the circle. As Spinoza says, using one of his most memorable phrases, many people "look on ideas . . . as mute pictures on a panel, and preoccupied with this prejudice, do not see that an idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves affirmation or negation" (E 2p49s). (The people preoccupied with this prejudice are, of course, the Cartesians, who believe that the will has power over the intellect, that we can choose to suspend belief even regarding things that are quite evident.) This principle applies to *all* ideas, even the simplest. We therefore find a counterpart in Spinoza to both of Delmedigo's unusual doctrines.

Now, the doctrine of identity of intellect and will is one of the most distinctive of Spinoza's teachings. It profoundly shapes the whole cast of the *Ethics*. It marks one of the crossroads where Spinoza decisively parts ways with Descartes, who in so many ways exercised a profound influence on him. And it appears to be borrowed from one of Delmedigo's few philosophical innovations. In fact, the scholium to E 2p49, one of the longest scholia in the *Ethics*, may be taken as a meditation on the cited passage from Delmedigo's *Sefer 'Elim*. If so, we must conclude that Delmedigo was in the truest sense one of Spinoza's teachers.

Of course, one cannot provide a demonstrative proof that Spinoza took this teaching from Delmedigo, short of discovering some previously unknown document from Spinoza's hand. The circumstantial evidence, however, is very strong: Spinoza is known to have read *'Elim*; indeed, we can be reasonably certain that he

read p. 56 of Part I.¹⁴ The teachings in question here are found on pp. 54-55. The teachings in question, if not unique, are at least highly unusual in the works that preceded Delmedigo's *'Elim*. So we have a likely case of borrowing and influence. The alternative is to suppose that the doctrine of identity of intellect and will is original with Spinoza, and not borrowed from anyone. Such a thought is not beyond the realm of possibility: Spinoza was a highly original thinker and it is not beyond his capacity to have come up with a highly original doctrine. But this alternative is highly implausible. It would be as if someone were seen reading A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* and, a short time later, were heard saying, "A proposition that cannot be verified is meaningless" (cf. Ayer 1936: 35). It would strain credulity to suppose that this person had not learned this doctrine from Ayer's book; and it would strain credulity to suppose that Spinoza did not learn the identity of intellect and will from Delmedigo's *Sefer 'Elim*.

This conclusion does not detract from Spinoza's greatness. On the contrary, it throws it into greater perspective. Delmedigo made almost nothing of his insight. It is a remark made in passing, a curious observation soon forgotten. By the end of *Ner 'Elohim*, Delmedigo is already suggesting that the will has power over the intellect. He recommends that we accept traditional religious beliefs handed down by report, provided there is no *demonstrative* proof to the contrary (Delmedigo 1629: 1:62-63). Indeed,

Consider well the words of the Torah, which states: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might' [Deut. 6:5]: that is to say, even contrary to your own will and intellect. For if you believe only that which intellectual syllogism can prove, you are obeying . . . your intellect rather than your God. However, just as you must *make naught thy will before the will of thy Maker*¹⁵ so must you make as naught the seduction of the intellect and believe in the Lord. (Delmedigo 1629: 1:63)

It took someone like Spinoza to realize the importance of Delmedigo's passing remark. It took someone like Spinoza to discern "how much knowledge of this doctrine is to our advantage in life. . . ."

¹⁴ This is the page where Delmedigo begins his discussion of the epistemological categories that Spinoza borrowed. See my forthcoming.

¹⁵ A paraphrase of Avot 2:4 / Herford 1962: 43.

[I]t teaches that we act only from God's command [and] that we share in the divine nature This doctrine, then, in addition to giving us complete peace of mind, also teaches us wherein our greatest happiness, or blessedness lies (E 2p49s)

Thus Spinoza, though acknowledging Delmedigo as one of his teachers, might have truthfully said, with the Psalmist: "I have gained more insight than all my teachers, for Thy testimonies are my meditation." (Ps. 119:99)

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Joseph Solomon Delmedgios Buch *Sefer 'Elim*, von dem bekannt ist, dass es sich in Spinozas Bibliothek befunden hat, erhebt wenig Anspruch auf Originalität. Tatsächlich besteht es im Wesentlichen aus einer Sammlung von Dingen, die Delmedgio von anderen gelernt hat. Eine der wenigen Lehren, die Delmedgio als eine Innovation vorstellt, ist die Lehre von nichtkomplexen Propositionen, also der Behauptung, dass ein Subjekt auch ohne ein dazugehöriges Prädikat eine wahrheitsfähige Aussage bilden kann. Diese Lehre macht es unmöglich, eine Idee einfach nur zu haben; vielmehr müsse sie zugleich bejaht oder verneint werden. Diese Lehre nun wird von Delmedgio und Spinoza geteilt, aber von nahezu niemandem sonst. Es ist daher offensichtlich, dass Spinoza einen seiner zentralen Lehrsätze von Delmedgio gelernt hat.

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