

Inside the ‘Babel of Naturalism’: Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in Translation¹

To move between languages, to translate, even within restrictions of totality, is to experience the
almost bewildering bias of the human spirit towards freedom.

Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 497

1.

Benedictus de Spinoza is the philosopher of ‘God or Nature’ (*Deus sive Natura*). God does not rule over Nature but coincides with it. God and Nature stand in an immanent relation. What could this philosophy mean in a state in which sovereignty refers to the rule of God, ‘the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation’? What does this entail for human society and for the relationship between religion and politics? The Empire’s most prominent theorist of natural law and human ethics, Samuel von Pufendorf (1632–1696), must have felt challenged when he read Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670; hereafter *TTP*).² He was inevitably bound to react to such an astonishing idea of God, that is, ‘God or Nature’, a ‘Babel of Naturalism’.³ Hence, in the second edition (1684) of his magnum opus *De jure naturae et gentium* (1672; hereafter *DJN*), Pufendorf included an interpretation of the *TTP*, or more precisely, a refutation of a few passages of the sixteenth chapter dealing with the natural right derived from Spinoza’s natural law and conception of supposedly human nature. It is, however, the translation (1706) by Jean Barbeyrac (1674–1744) that brought the *DJN* its European fame, especially after Barbeyrac’s translation (1707) of the abridged version, *De officio hominis et civis juxta legem naturalem* (1673), also known as ‘*le petit Pufendorf*’.⁴ Pufendorf’s work subsequently had a major influence on natural and international law in Protestant academia until into the nineteenth century. Both through traditional scholasticism and new philosophy, the Lutheran Pufendorf brought Hobbes’s doctrine of self-interest and Grotius’s doctrine of social disposition together in a natural law theory that established the universal law of human conduct relatively independently from theology and religion.⁵ The Huguenot Barbeyrac, who

¹ Text published in *The Original in its Metamorphoses: Tracing the Translator in the Long Eighteenth Century (1660-1830)*, edited by B. de Grootte & al., Turnhout, Brepols, 2025, pp. 231-248.

² For citations from the *TTP*, I use the English translation by Edwin Curley (The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II, pp. 65–354) and the Latin edition by Carl Gebhardt where necessary (Spinoza Opera, vol. III).

³ This expression was used in the very first public refutation of the *TTP* by Jakob Thomasius to point out the danger of Spinoza’s freedom of philosophizing and democratic politics, see Bartholomew Begley, ‘Naturalism and its Political Dangers’.

⁴ Ian Hunter, ‘Conflicting Obligations’, p. 689; Meri Päävärinne, ‘Jean Barbeyrac’, p. 63; Arild Sæther, ‘Pufendorf and His Importance’, pp. 18–19. The foundational study on the dissemination of Pufendorf’s work by Barbeyrac is Sieglinde Othmer, *Berlin und die Verbreitung des Naturrechts in Europa*.

⁵ Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, pp. 194–99; Sæther, ‘Pufendorf and His Importance’, p. 13.

had come to the Empire after fleeing the kingdom of Louis XIV, remained suspicious regarding the secularization of universal morality and instead advanced Locke's doctrine of natural rights and inviolable conscience against any absolute power of civil authority.⁶ While translating the *DJN* and *le petit Pufendorf*, Barbeyrac philosophized with and against Pufendorf, namely by an 'activist' engagement with the text,⁷ much like his Huguenot colleagues Jean Le Clerc and Pierre Coste in the case of Locke. Barbeyrac's textual adjustments, omissions and additions, his footnotes, his worthwhile preface, all testify to the religiously inspired yet politically relevant nature of his translation. During his whole life, Barbeyrac continued to elaborate on the philosophical encounter with Pufendorf.⁸

Other editors and translators of Pufendorf's *DJN*, in their turn, studied Barbeyrac's editions and translated and copied his footnotes and preface. Barbeyrac was well aware of this and commented on their work in his second edition of 1712. On the Latin edition by the law professor Johann Nikolaus Hertius, who himself added a few footnotes to Pufendorf's text, Barbeyrac remarks that these footnotes were compiled 'hastily, to please the Bookseller, who wanted to enhance [donner du relief à] his Edition by some additions that were not to be found in the previous editions: I saw there only very little that could satisfy me [*je n'ai vu là que très peu de choses qui pussent m'accommoder*]'.⁹ Hertius's edition was first published in 1706 and in 1744 eventually augmented with a selection of Barbeyrac's footnotes. The German translation of the *DJN* was from the hand of Immanuel Weber, a colleague of Hertius at the university of Giessen, and was published in 1711. Weber borrowed footnotes from both Hertius and Barbeyrac in his own commentary, which is something that Barbeyrac did not appreciate, as he somewhat sarcastically remarks: 'But if we are to judge by the manner in which he has used my Notes, he promises in the Title much more than he delivers [*il promet dans le Titre beaucoup plus qu'il ne tient*]: for, although he has done me the honor of attaching my name to that of Mr Hertius as if he had translated my Notes, he [Weber] has only taken very few and the shortest of them.'¹⁰ The English translation by the Oxford scholar Basil Kennett was published in 1703, but Barbeyrac is unaware of the name and thinks that the translation was done by different hands. While Kennet updated his edition several times based on Barbeyrac's ongoing work, Barbeyrac concluded from his side that consulting the English translation did not serve him anything.¹¹ He finds that 'the Translators have not taken the trouble to dig into the Author's direction [*pour pénétrer dans le sens de l'Auteur*] and to make him readable with success and pleasure'.¹²

⁶ Sophie Bisset, 'Jean Barbeyrac's Theory', pp. 556–58; Tim Hochstrasser, 'The Natural Law Theory', pp. 290–91; Hunter, 'Conflicting Obligations', pp. 693–94; David Saunders, 'The Natural Jurisprudence', p. 480.

⁷ Päivärinne, 'Jean Barbeyrac', pp. 67–68; Saunders, 'The Natural Jurisprudence', p. 484.

⁸ I have examined the first edition (1706), the second edition (1712), the fourth edition (1732), the fifth edition (1734), and the last 'new edition' (1740) that was published still during Barbeyrac's lifetime. The third edition, which apparently was published in Amsterdam in 1732 (see Päivärinne, 'Jean Barbeyrac', p. 63), was not available to me. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from the first edition of Barbeyrac's translation of the *DJN*.

⁹ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1712), p. XI. For lengthier citations from Barbeyrac's editions, I will keep the original French in the body text and give an English translation in a footnote.

¹⁰ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1712), p. XI.

¹¹ Meri Päivärinne, 'Enlightened Translations', p. 5.

¹² Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1712), p. XII.

These early editions, in all their variation and possible shortcomings, codetermined for many readers the experience and historical conditions of reading the *DJN* and interpreting and understanding the *TTP*. Since Barbeyrac is the editor who most furthered the reading of the *DJN*, he also played a significant role in furthering the interpretation of the *TTP*, or at least Pufendorf's interpretation of it, namely, by his ongoing work of commentary and translation.¹³ Before examining the development of this interpretative process, it is interesting to note that the complex encounter between Spinoza, Pufendorf, and Barbeyrac is mainly negotiated through a fourth thinker, Thomas Hobbes. The two places in the *DJN* where Pufendorf takes on Spinoza are preceded by a discussion of Hobbes's position on natural law and atheism, respectively.¹⁴ Although Barbeyrac will turn out to be a more careful reader of the *TTP* than Pufendorf, finally he too fails to grasp Spinoza's philosophical autonomy with regard to Hobbes.¹⁵ Besides, both Pufendorf and Barbeyrac seem to have read Spinoza only very partially,¹⁶ which also explains the confusion and irritation as they try to understand the *TTP*'s theory of natural law, starting with the very words. From Spinoza's perspective, while the word 'nature' brings God into play in a philosophy of immanence, the word 'law' is conceptualized as presumably the theological-political category *par excellence*.¹⁷ Pufendorf and Barbeyrac, on the other hand, understand natural law as the ethical code that surpasses nature in a universal morality, which entails the word 'law' to mean the transcendent command to obey authority.¹⁸ Metaphorically speaking, they 'translate' Spinoza's conception of the law into a divine truth. This corresponds precisely to the 'metaphoric' (*per translationem*) operations that Spinoza exposes in the *TTP* as he works his way through the legal institution of politics and sovereignty, implying a so-called 'transfer' (*translatio*) of natural right to the civil legislator.¹⁹ In Barbeyrac's translation of Pufendorf's refutation of the *TTP*, the words concerned are problematized through translation itself taking note of Spinoza's philosophy and becoming

¹³ To speak with Steiner (see *After Babel*, p. 28), interpretation and translation coincide in 'that which gives language [and we may think of 'the *TTP*'] life beyond the moment and place of immediate utterance or transcription'.

¹⁴ See Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), II.2.§ 3, pp. 159–63; III.4.§ 4, p. 391.

¹⁵ In his fifth edition, for instance, Barbeyrac adds in his preface (see Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1734), préface du traducteur § 29, p. CVI): 'Spinoza has had since [Hobbes] precisely (*TTP* Cap. XVI, XIX) the same ideas on the State of Nature, which he founds on the same principles, and like him [Hobbes], he also turns Religion dependent on the Authority of the Sovereign.' Yet, as Edwin Curley remarks ('Samuel Pufendorf', p. 90 (n. 2)), and as every reader of the *TTP* and *De cive* knows, Spinoza and Hobbes build their understanding of the state of nature on different principles.

¹⁶ Curley ('Samuel Pufendorf', pp. 95–96) remarks that there is no indication that Pufendorf would have had any knowledge of the *Ethics*, the *Tractatus Politicus*, or even the *TTP* as a whole. This probably also holds for Barbeyrac, though he may have known more of the *TTP* as well as, for instance, Pierre Bayle's seminal article on Spinoza in the *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1697).

¹⁷ André Tosel, *Spinoza ou le crépuscule de la servitude*, p. 168.

¹⁸ For an overview study of Pufendorf's natural law, see Kari Saastamoinen, *The Morality of The Fallen Man*. On Barbeyrac's natural law, see for instance Bisset, 'Jean Barbeyrac's Theory', or Hochstrasser, 'The Natural Law Theory'.

¹⁹ Spinoza uses the word '*translatio*' once in the fourth chapter ('Of the Divine Law') to designate the 'metaphoric' use of the word 'law' and once in the seventeenth chapter to describe the ancient Hebrews' submission of natural right to their transcendent God. Furthermore, '*translatus*' is used three times in the middle chapters, which are concerned with biblical criticism and in which the role of translation is noted in understanding Scripture's Hebrew language, and three more times in the 'political chapters' to describe indeed the transfer and submission of natural right to an external authority. Spinoza's use of the words *translatio* and *translatus* suggests that the relation between religion and politics – the theological-political relation – can be conceived through the notion of 'translation'.

entangled with it. Through Barbeyrac interpreting a reading of the *TTP*, Spinoza's work comes to life as a process of interpretation and translation, meaning the continuously transformational process of words, thoughts, and human existence, involving Barbeyrac himself, a translator engaged in the reality of human experience. For this to become clear, first, natural law is discussed between the different authors, though ultimately from the perspective of the reader Barbeyrac, who translates the whole discussion and critically establishes the limits of mutual understanding. Second, Barbeyrac delves further into his reading and critique by actually experimenting with the immanent force of Spinoza's philosophy, mobilizing all translating power in the immanent desire for permanent translation, thus understanding reality. However, third, such understanding is never an accomplished fact, and therefore, Barbeyrac is bound to take his life experience into account, which brings him to conclude that the question of interpretation and translation ultimately pertains to the freedom of the human conscience.

2.

As formulated in its subtitle, the *TTP* argues that 'the republic can grant freedom of philosophizing [*Libertatem Philosophandi*] without harming its peace or piety, and cannot deny it without destroying its peace and piety'. The freedom of philosophizing is thus politically inevitable. However, the republic or state should not affirm such freedom positively and impose it by law. It should rather leave its citizens to practice it by themselves. Spinoza takes great care to separate philosophy and theology so citizens would not reduce one to the other and impose final truths on citizen debates, blocking the freedom of philosophizing. At the beginning of the sixteenth chapter, Spinoza states: 'Now it's time for us to ask how far this freedom of thought, and of saying what you think, extends in the best Republic [*in optima Republica*].'²⁰ Spinoza thinks the freedom of philosophizing within the context of the best state and will therefore critically investigate the foundations of states in general, which entails an investigation of natural law, that is, the natural right of everyone. After criticizing the voluntarist use of the word 'law' (*lex*) in the fourth chapter and advancing a naturalist understanding, Spinoza returns to this naturalist law in the sixteenth chapter to develop his criticisms by thinking right (*jus*) through power (*potentia*):

By the right and established practice of nature [*jus & institutum naturae*] I mean nothing but the rules of the nature of each individual, according to which we conceive each thing to be naturally determined to existing and having effects in a certain way. For example, fish are determined by nature to swimming, and the large ones to eating the smaller. So it is by the supreme right of nature that fish are masters of the water, and that the large ones eat the smaller.²¹

This is exactly the citation that launches Pufendorf in his refutation of Spinoza's natural law. Curiously, Barbeyrac's translation makes a false start by omitting the concluding sentence

²⁰ *TTP* XVI, G III.189.

²¹ *TTP* XVI, G III.189.

of the citation.²² Also in the next sentence, Barbeyrac modifies Pufendorf's text, which is a commentary on the previous citation. Yet, this time, Barbeyrac explains himself in a footnote:

Ubi notandum, hoc loco per vocabulum *juris* non notari legem, juxta quam agendum sit, sed facultatem agendi, & quid citra injuriam agere quis possit.²³

(Sur quoi il faut remarquer, que par le terme de *droit* cet Auteur [Spinoza] n'entend pas la Loi sur laquelle on doit se régler, & (1) ce que chacun peut faire sans qu'un autre en reçoive du tort, mais seulement la faculté naturelle d'agir.)²⁴

(1) Les termes de l'Original sont ainsi conçus dans toutes les dernières Editions (car dans la première il n'y avait rien de cette réfutation de *Spinoza*) *on n'entend pas ici la Loi selon laquelle on doit agir, mais la faculté d'agir, & ce que chacun peut faire sans faire du tort*. Cela forme un galimathias incompréhensible, & l'on voit bien qu'il s'est glissé ici une transposition. Car les dernières paroles, *ce que chacun peut faire sans du tort*, se doivent rapporter visiblement, non à la simple faculté d'agir, qui peut faire beaucoup de tort, mais à la Loi, qui défend de faire du tort à personne. On ne trouvera pas ce désordre dans ma traduction.²⁵²⁶

According to Pufendorf, Spinoza understands right as a faculty to act, namely, to act without causing injustice. Following Grotian natural law theory, such faculty, or 'perfect right', would consist of a general moral power to act without deliberately damaging other individuals in their enforceable rights, which is a faculty that Pufendorf understands from his side as an active moral quality.²⁷ Still following Grotian theory, Spinoza's mention of 'the rules of the nature of each individual' should then be interpreted as a natural morality and individual obligation to obey the law, 'even if we would say that there is no God' (*etiamsi daremus non esse Deum*). From Pufendorf's side, however, such a reading is impossible since morality depends on the free will and rational capacity to realize the obligation toward the law, which surely is anticipated in the religious obedience to God's authority. Yet, Spinoza, contrary to

²² Even more curiously, Curley ('Samuel Pufendorf', p. 90) thinks it is Pufendorf who omits the sentence, which is clearly not the case seeing the original text. Besides, all Latin, English, and German editions of the DJN avoid Barbeyrac's mistake.

²³ Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), II.2. § 3, p. 160.

²⁴ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), II.2. § 3, p. 142. The English and Latin editions of the DJN render this sentence precisely as Pufendorf published it in 1684. The German edition follows Barbeyrac's modification of the sentence.

²⁵ My translation of Barbeyrac's translation and footnote: 'Upon which it has to be remarked that by the term "right" this Author [Spinoza] does not mean the Law to which one must conform and (1) what each may do without damaging another, but only the natural faculty to act.'

(1) 'The terms of the Original are conceived in all the latest Editions (for in the first there was nothing of this refutation of Spinoza) as following: 'One does not mean here the Law according to which one must act but the faculty to act and what each may do without causing damage.' This amounts to an unintelligible gibberish and it is clear that a displacement has happened here. For the last words, 'what each may do without causing damage,' clearly refers, not to the simple faculty to act which may cause much damage, but to the Law, which forbids damaging anyone. This disorder will not be found in my translation.'

²⁶ In his second edition (1712), Barbeyrac inserts in this footnote extra details on the editing history of the DJN: 'The terms of the Original are conceived in all the Editions of Germany and Holland without excepting the last edition from 1706 of which Mr Hertius took care (for in the first, which the Author published at Lund in Sweden in 1672, there was nothing of this refutation of Spinoza) as following: [...].' The subsequent English editions copy Barbeyrac's revised footnote, while the subsequent Latin and German editions do not.

²⁷ On the Grotian concept of 'facultas' and Pufendorf's understanding of it, see Curley, 'Samuel Pufendorf', pp. 91–92; Jacqueline Lagrée, 'Grotius: Natural Law', pp. 19–20; Johan Olsthoorn, 'Grotius and Pufendorf', pp. 63–64.

both Grotius and Pufendorf, evacuates all obligation and morality from natural law since right is not defined by some transcendent authority but by the self-legitimizing ‘conatus’, the immanent desire that produces the expression of ‘God *or* Nature’ throughout both passivity and activity. Still, Pufendorf’s argument seems reasonable considering his Grotian interpretation of Spinoza’s above citation as implying a natural law based on a supposedly natural morality and understanding of justice. Barbeyrac strongly disagrees and corrects in his translation such ‘*galimathias incompréhensible*’. Nevertheless, he does agree that Spinoza’s conception of right is unsatisfying as it advances a natural law without the idea of obligation and it would therefore need further interpretation. Barbeyrac thinks that Spinoza cannot deny natural right to belong to a transcendent truth and divine judge without also denying the faculty to act without causing injustice, that is, ‘the natural faculty to act’ (*la faculté naturelle d’agir*) according to what is morally right. Considering his Lockean sympathies, Barbeyrac conveniently interpreted this ‘natural’ faculty to act morally as an inalienable right, which is of the essence to each individual, especially a French Protestant fleeing royal persecution, following his conscience. Accordingly, Barbeyrac’s theological-politically inspired modification of Pufendorf’s commentary suggests that the word ‘nature’ is of essential importance when interpreting the *TTP*. Barbeyrac’s translation delves into the conceptual power of ‘nature’ and finds itself more intimately thinking the actual issue, Spinoza’s natural law. Barbeyrac translates following his natural faculty to act while moving closer to Spinozist thought and thus to the immanent desire actually making him act, translate, interpret, and understand.

Either through a Grotian reading of faculty as a moral power or a Lockean defense of the religious conscience, both interpretations of Spinoza’s citation stand their ground. Despite their respective priorities and interests, Pufendorf and Barbeyrac converge in a shared understanding of natural law as a collection of intrinsic values and moral faculties that individuals, as it were, possess, amounting to ‘natural’ property rights. Spinoza, by contrast, conceptualizes natural right as the natural ‘law’ of a conatus, that is, ‘nothing but the rules [*regulas*] of the nature of each individual, according to which we conceive each thing to be naturally determined to existing and having effects [*existendum & operandum*] in a certain way’.²⁸ In this sense, Barbeyrac’s translation of Pufendorf can be conceived as naturally right according to the rules by which the translator Barbeyrac translates in a determined way. These rules are constituted through the conatus of translation or thus the natural right and rules corresponding to translation’s existence and operations, meaning translating power (*potentia*), and inevitably involving Barbeyrac’s particular (way of) translation. In other words, the rules of translation and a particular translation are immanent to each other as translating power necessarily constitutes and produces both the rules and the natural right of any translation. In producing the rules to conceive of translation properly, translating power brings forward the immanent desire to rightfully translate as one interprets and understands carefully, constantly adjusting the rules and method when necessary.²⁹ It should be emphasized that translation does

²⁸ *TTP* XVI, G III.189. Of course, in the *TTP*, the *conatus* does not yet figure as such, i.e., the dynamic force of determination. However, through the *TTP*’s passive determination, as it turns out, the *conatus* is already in action, see the eighth chapter of my doctoral thesis, ‘Spinoza, Critique and Freedom: The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and its Contemporary Readers’.

²⁹ Concerning this method for careful interpretation, see the fifth chapter of my doctoral thesis.

not seek the ‘right’ interpretation or explanation by a given method or by rules of authority. Instead, translation continually creates its own rules following translating power and the evolving process of interpretation and understanding what is in translation. Indeed, what is naturally right is to be in permanent translation.

Next, Pufendorf accuses Spinoza’s natural law of misrepresenting right by allegedly advancing it independent from reason. Barbeyrac translates by adding the words ‘*qualité Physique*’ as he more carefully observes Spinoza’s conceptual displacement in the language of natural law. Barbeyrac reflects on his observation in a footnote by noting Spinoza’s disregard for the notions of duty or legitimacy, developing the *TTP*’s interpretation and the *DJN*’s translation.

Eoque non recte inferri, omnia ad quae agenda jus aliquis habet, necessario quoque eundem agere debere. Deinde uti impropria est acceptio vocabuli, *legis naturalis*, quando notat id, secundum quod unaquaeque res certa ac determinata ratione agit: Sic & improprie potentia & modus agendi, qui in creaturis ratione non praeditis conspicitur, juris nomine vocatur. Nam proprie illum duntaxat jus ad agendum habere dicimus, qui praevia ratione agit.³⁰

(Or sur ce pied-là, on ne saurait insérer en bonne Logique, que chacun doit faire nécessairement tout ce qu’il a *droit* de faire (2). De plus comme c’est parler fort improprement que d’appeler *Loi Naturelle*, cette qualité Physique par laquelle chaque chose produit ses opérations d’une manière fixe & déterminée; c’est aussi donner un sens bien impropre au terme de *droit*, que de lui faire signifier le pouvoir & la manière d’agir qui se trouve dans les Créatures destituées de Raison. Car à parler exactement le *droit* d’agir ne convient qu’aux Êtres Intelligents.)³¹

(2) En effet le simple pouvoir Physique de faire une chose, ne prouve point qu’on soit tenu indispensablement de la faire; ni qu’on puisse la faire légitimement, si l’on veut.³²

This time, Barbeyrac does not dispute Pufendorf’s argument but confirms and expands on it. Barbeyrac certainly agrees that the laws of nature describing natural causation do not amount to natural law, properly speaking, and to what is supremely right for rational creatures. It would be nonsensical to say that ‘it is by the supreme right of nature [*summo naturali jure*] that fish are masters of the water, and that the large ones eat the smaller’.³³ For Spinoza, however, it is precisely in the active affirmation of such right that reason empowers the so-called natural law of the *conatus* and accordingly increases the immanent desire to swim, translate, obey civil law, or act morally. Still, Barbeyrac thinks that Spinoza does not take into account duty or legitimacy. More precisely, Spinoza’s natural law does not entail a universal morality but only the appetite and effort to persevere in existence and its operations. Barbeyrac therefore suspects that arguing against Spinoza within the context of traditional natural law

³⁰ Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), II.2. § 3, p. 160.

³¹ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), II.2. § 3, p. 142.

³² My translation: ‘Now on this basis, it cannot be logically accepted that each must necessarily do all that one has the “right” to do (2). Moreover, just as it is very unfitting to call “Natural Law” that Physical quality by which each thing produces its operations in a fixed and determined way, so it is unfitting to give a meaning to the term “right” that makes it signify the power and way of acting which is found in Creatures deprived of Reason. For to speak exactly, the ‘right’ to act only bears on Intelligent Beings.’

(2): ‘Indeed, the mere physical power to do something does not prove that one is indispensably bound to do it, nor that one can do it legitimately if one wishes so.’

³³ *TTP* XVI, G III.189.

theory will be in vain. After having pondered the issue again, he adds in his second edition of the *DJN* one more sentence to the above footnote:

Unless one assumes, which is the case, that *Physical power* and *Moral power* [*le pouvoir Physique, & le pouvoir Moral*] are one and the same thing.³⁴

Barbeyrac concludes his attempt to understand Spinoza with an identity, and since an identity cannot be further interpreted, Barbeyrac returns to simply translating Pufendorf's text. All in all, the words 'nature' and 'law' have clearly evoked Barbeyrac's translating power but have also exposed a limit to his interpretation and translation of Pufendorf and Spinoza and to a further elaboration of this philosophical encounter. The limit relates to the very idea of natural law, which Pufendorf, Barbeyrac, and Spinoza all understand as fundamental, yet it divides. A certain 'precomprehension' is at work in the conception of natural law.³⁵ Such precomprehension anticipates the meaningful intention towards fundamental understanding by opening up beyond meaning another space of understanding. This space amounts to the interpretation of interpretation itself, or thus immanent critique and the desire to think more carefully. Barbeyrac and Pufendorf share a similar precomprehension regarding natural law because they similarly use the words 'nature' and 'law' to construct natural law's meaning. Accordingly, Barbeyrac can indeed meaningfully agree or disagree with Pufendorf on natural law and translate powerfully. However, both Barbeyrac and Pufendorf fail to grasp Spinoza, lacking a common precomprehension, and will thus sooner (Pufendorf) or later (Barbeyrac) discard the conversation, which, as it were, never begun. The conditions for producing an 'intermediary language' and entering a 'process of inter-locution' were not sufficiently met, at least not from the perspective of the individual reader and translator, Barbeyrac.³⁶ Perhaps Spinozism, 'which is the sponge of Religion and Morality,'³⁷ could absorb the different perspectives and become that intermediary language between readers, interpreters, and translators? Regarding Pufendorf and Barbeyrac, this might turn out quite challenging since Spinoza's philosophy involves internal tensions related to the words 'nature' and 'law', which therefore resist any purely descriptive or instrumental approach by traditional natural law theorists.³⁸ In sum, the limit of a common precomprehension seems real but impossible to work with.

3.

Yet translation continues. Barbeyrac's next noteworthy intervention takes on Pufendorf's commentary of Spinoza's following lines:

For it's certain that nature, considered absolutely, has the supreme right to do everything it can, i.e., that the right of nature extends as far as its power does [*jus naturae eo usque se extendere*,

³⁴ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1712), II.2.§ 3, p. 155.

³⁵ Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau, 'Spinoza ou la puissance de la traduction', p. 381.

³⁶ Lagrée and Moreau, 'Spinoza ou la puissance de la traduction', p. 381.

³⁷ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), préface du traducteur § 14, p. XXXVIII.

³⁸ See Lagrée and Moreau, 'Spinoza ou la puissance de la traduction', pp. 382–83.

quo usque ejus potentia se extendit]. For the power of nature is the power of God itself [*naturae enim potentia ipsa Dei potentia est*], and he has the supreme right over all things.³⁹

What was implicit before is now fully present, namely, the immediate interrelation between right and power. Even more, the scandalous proposition ‘right *or* power’ (*jus sive potentia*) is instantly doubled by the equally scandalous proposition ‘God *or* Nature’ (*Deus sive Natura*), which arises in the argument that the power of nature is the power of God itself.⁴⁰ Pufendorf is thrown off balance, starting with the expression ‘nature considered absolutely’, for which he weighs up two interpretations.⁴¹ At first, Barbeyrac must also have been startled and doubtful, but by his second edition, Barbeyrac made up his mind and rejected Pufendorf’s first suggestion on the interpretation of ‘nature considered absolutely’, as the footnote tells:

Heic si per *naturam absolute consideratam* intelligitur Deus junctim cum rebus creates, concedimus istam assertionem, Deoque jus summum ad omnia lubentes tribuimus, quod tamen ad perfectionem essentiae ipsius sit attemperatum. Sed si per *naturam* intelligatur universitas rerum creaturarum, Deo contradistincta, tunc negamus, potentiam naturae esse ipsius Dei potentiam, & illam cum hac aequae late patere.⁴²

(Si par la *Nature considérée absolument & en elle-même*, on (4) entend Dieu conjointement avec les Créatures; j’accorde cette Proposition, & je reconnais volontiers en Dieu un droit souverain sur toutes choses, qui est néanmoins tempéré par les Vertus & par la perfection de son essence infinie. Mais si par la *Nature* on entend l’assemblage de tous les Êtres créez, par opposition à Dieu, je nie alors que le pouvoir de la Nature soit la Puissance même de Dieu, & que le premier s’étende aussi loin que l’autre.)⁴³

(4) On voit assez que Spinoza ne reconnaît point de Dieu, ou d’Être intelligent & tout parfait. Ce qu’il appelle *Dieu*, n’est autre chose que le Monde qu’il suppose éternel & increé.⁴⁴

While Pufendorf does not accept his own second suggestion, Barbeyrac thinks this is exactly how Spinoza intends ‘nature considered absolutely’. Anyway, Barbeyrac too does not accept the equation of the divine creator with the whole of creation since this would mean the denial of God’s metaphysical essence and creative capacity, springing from an infinite excess

³⁹ TTP XVI, G III.189.

⁴⁰ Although ‘*Deus sive Natura*’ appears as such nowhere in the *TTP*, Spinoza’s radical denial of supernaturalism implies that knowing the power of nature means knowing nature itself, and considering that knowing the power of God must mean knowing God himself since God is the supreme instance, it can be deduced that if the power of nature is the power of God itself, then God can be known by nature, or thus *Deus sive Natura*. See also Jacqueline Lagrée, *Spinoza et le débat religieux*, pp. 84–85.

⁴¹ In the context of this relatively careful approach, Curley (‘Samuel Pufendorf’, pp. 92–93) calls Pufendorf ‘a worthy opponent of Spinoza’, especially regarding the second suggestion of interpretation, which touches on Spinoza’s actual use of the word ‘nature’. However, Curley points out the restrictions of Pufendorf’s voluntarist natural law theory, which consequently confine any precomprehension and hinder any intermediary language and powerful translation.

⁴² Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), II.2.§ 3, p. 160.

⁴³ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1712), II.2.§ 3, p. 155.

⁴⁴ ‘If “Nature considered absolutely and in itself” (4) means God together with the Creatures, then I grant this Proposition and I readily acknowledge in God a sovereign right over all things but which is nevertheless tempered by the Virtues and by the perfection of [God’s] infinite essence. However, if ‘Nature’ means the collection of all created Beings as opposed to God, then I deny that the power of Nature is the very Power of God and that the first extends as far as the other.’

(4): ‘It is clear enough that Spinoza does not recognize a God or an intelligent and all-perfect Being. What he calls “God” is nothing but the World which he supposes to be eternal and not-created.’

between intellect and will. Barbeyrac seems to emphasize the contrast between creator and creation by rendering the '*potentia*' that Spinoza equally attributes to both as, respectively, '*Puissance*' and '*pouvoir*'. This is the case in the translation of Pufendorf's commentary but also in the translation of Spinoza's very citation.⁴⁵ Barbeyrac's urge to correct Spinoza's thoughts and words must have been great, especially when realizing that he was dealing with some atheist.⁴⁶ He would never accept that nature is a totality of both God and creation and that the supreme right of the former over the latter is a mere illusion. Even more, in his translation of Pufendorf's commentary, Barbeyrac added the 'Virtues' (*les Vertus*) to the perfection of God's supreme right and, accordingly, by introducing the need for moral cultivation, developed Pufendorf's argument with an extra element. In Barbeyrac's fifth edition, however, the addition is moved to the back of the sentence: '[...] which is nevertheless tempered by what the perfection of [God's] infinite essence requires, or by the Virtues [*par ce que demande la perfection de son essence infinie, ou par les Vertus*]'.⁴⁷ Interestingly, by separating moral cultivation as a valid alternative, the progressive Huguenot Barbeyrac is effectively advancing the autonomy and freedom of the conscience.

Following Pufendorf's examination of 'nature considered absolutely' and Barbeyrac's careful but strategic interventions, both readers attentively turn to Spinoza's argument that 'the right of nature extends as far as its power does', Pufendorf mostly paraphrasing what he can understand and Barbeyrac translating Pufendorf for once docilely. But while doing so, with Pufendorf and Barbeyrac still troubled by the ideas of 'right *or* power' and 'God *or* Nature',⁴⁸ something seems to remain uninterpreted and untranslated. By accompanying Spinoza's deduction of the interrelation between right and power given God's supreme right over all things,⁴⁹ Pufendorf and Barbeyrac run into the internal tensions of Spinoza's natural law, which precisely involve the problem of the Spinozist relation, being immediate while, as it were, mediated by the '*sive*'. In other words, the tensions concerned arise from the paradox of an identity that amounts to a relation of becoming, striving to persevere in its being by being in transformation. Concerning the interrelation between right and power, the infinite paradox could be read more objectively as a 'symptomatic relationship between law and politics'.⁵⁰ Accordingly, the law is a symptom of politics, namely the idea of conflict, and cannot be reduced to the conflictual object. After all, the *sive* establishes the interrelation between right and power while transforming it and, as such, constitutes the symptomatic and not parallel

⁴⁵ See Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1712), II.2.§ 3, p. 155.

⁴⁶ Yet, Barbeyrac avoided any explicit observations on Spinoza's alleged religiosity. He even omitted in his translation (Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), II.2.§ 3, p. 141) Pufendorf's remark that the author of the *TTP* would be 'an ex-Jew according to Samuel Maresius', see Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), II.2.§ 3, p. 159. The Huguenot Maresius, a conservative theologian and professor in Groningen, was the first reader to publicly denounce the anonymous author of the *TTP* by his actual name, Spinoza, and additionally even called him a 'blasphemer and formal atheist' while pointing towards a link with radical Cartesianism, see Steven Nadler, 'Spinoza, Descartes and the "stupid Cartesians"', pp. 661–62. Perhaps, the more liberal Barbeyrac, a supporter of the freedom of conscience, tried to somewhat conserve Spinoza's personal integrity.

⁴⁷ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1734), II.2.§ 3, p. 167.

⁴⁸ The *DJN*'s German editor notes Spinoza's 'identification' of nature and God right away and remarks that it is even clearer from the sixth chapter ('On Miracles') and from Bayle's Spinoza article in the *Dictionnaire*, see Pufendorf, *Acht Bücher vom Natur- und Völckerrechte* (1711), II.2.§ 3, p. 276 (n. 7, the second one).

⁴⁹ For a close analysis of this deduction, see Edwin Curley, 'The State of Nature and Its Law', pp. 102–07; Alexandre Matheron, *Études sur Spinoza*, pp. 119–22.

⁵⁰ Filippo Del Lucchese, 'The Symptomatic Relationship between Law and Conflict', p. 34.

relation between law and conflict. Through the *sive*, the symptom acts as a phenomenon indicating the transformations of an objective reality and thus exposing, as it were, reality itself. In sum, the *sive* conceptualizes the relations that constitute reality and its intelligibility. However, throughout the infinite process of the *sive*, something seems to remain uninterpreted and untranslated, namely the *sive* itself, which ultimately is nothing less but the immanent desire for permanent translation. The *sive* puts interpreters and translators at work by making them participate in the permanent task of understanding and freeing reality, starting with the words and text at hand: ‘nature’, ‘law’, and the *TTP*. By contrast, readers find themselves caught inside a ‘Babel of Naturalism’ when they deny the immanent need or desire for permanent translation, restraining the reality of the *sive*.⁵¹

When the time has come to interpret the deduction showing the interrelation between right and power, Pufendorf decides to straighten out Spinoza’s ‘ambiguous’ deduction and unmask the scandalous theory. Barbeyrac, however, subtly reorients Pufendorf’s approach by using the word ‘*équivoques*’ in his translation.

Clarius patebit vanitas horum ratiociniorum, si reffectis ambagibus ita proponantur: Deus habet jus summum ad omnia; naturae potentia est Dei potentia: ergo & natura jus habet ad omnia; potentia autem naturae est potentia omnium individuorum simul: ergo singula individua jus ad omnia habent.⁵²

(Mais pour mettre dans tout son jour la faiblesse de tous ces raisonnements, il ne faut qu’en ôter les équivoques, & que les proposer sans détour tout d’une suite. Voici donc à quoi ils se réduisent. Dieu a un droit absolu à toute chose: Le pouvoir de la Nature est le pouvoir de Dieu; donc la Nature a droit à toutes choses. Or le pouvoir de la Nature est le pouvoir de tous les individus pris ensemble: donc chaque individu a droit à toutes choses.)⁵³

Although ‘*ambages*’ and ‘*équivoques*’ both expose a certain confusion or lack of understanding, each means it differently. The word ‘*ambages*’ combines ‘*ambi*’ (on both sides; around) and ‘*agere*’ (to act) to mean that different interpretations go around without achieving any straight argument. The word ‘*équivoques*’, on the other hand, combines ‘*aequus*’ (equal) and ‘*vocus*’ (having meaning) to mean that one and the same argument is liable to different interpretations. The contrast is slight but telling as it suggests that Pufendorf considers Spinoza not even to have a proper argument, while Barbeyrac understands that the argument exists but that is irretrievably lost in debate if not translation.⁵⁴ For Barbeyrac, the confusion regarding

⁵¹ This human tendency produces the linguistic diversity of Babel, which corresponds to Steiner’s hypothesis (see *After Babel*, p. 497) that ‘the proliferation of mutually incomprehensible tongues stems from an absolutely fundamental impulse in language itself,’ namely *sive*’s reality and the immanent desire for permanent translation.

⁵² Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), II.2.§ 3, p. 161.

⁵³ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), II.2.§ 3, p. 143. ‘But in order to fully expose the weakness of all this reasoning, we need only remove all equivocation and advance things without detours and straight away. So here is what it boils down to: God has an absolute right to all things. The power of Nature is the power of God. Therefore Nature has a right to all things. Now, the power of Nature is the power of all individuals taken together. Therefore each individual has a right to all things.’

⁵⁴ Barbeyrac is the only translator to understand things in this way. In the first English edition (see Pufendorf, *On the Law of Nature and Nations* (1703), II.2.§ 3, p. 83), we read: ‘But the Vanity of such Reasonings will more fully appear, if divesting them of their dark turnings and Intricacies we thus clearly propose them: [...]’ In the first German edition (see Pufendorf, *Acht Bücher vom Natur- und Völkerrechte* (1711), II.2.§ 3, p. 272), we

Spinoza's natural law is not given but constantly produced. While both Pufendorf and Barbeyrac would surely wish for divine truth to judge and clear up Spinoza's confusing argument, only Barbeyrac realizes that he is participating in a confused debate. Barbeyrac understands that debate, interpretation, and translation are inevitable in evaluating an argument. Hence, by carefully reading and evaluating Spinoza's argument, Barbeyrac powerfully translates Pufendorf's refutation, namely through reorienting it towards an interpretation with more meaning that increases Barbeyrac's translating power and immanent desire for permanent translation, which involves a right understanding of Spinoza's philosophy. Clearly, Barbeyrac is not insensitive to the *sive* as a careful reader of Spinoza's argument or even a Spinozist-to-be.⁵⁵

Correspondingly, in his fifth edition of the *DJN* (1734), almost thirty years after the first one (1706), Barbeyrac is still interpreting and translating Pufendorf's refutation of Spinoza. On this occasion, Barbeyrac adds one long footnote in which he once again points out the confusion of Spinoza's natural law, '*une espèce de jeu de mots,*' while continuing to advance careful thinking.⁵⁶ Barbeyrac does this by referencing the poet Virgil and the Stoics, placing Spinoza in the much older natural law tradition of ancient philosophy, in which the moral law would be identical to the law of nature.

It has happened that we metaphorically apply the name of 'Law' [*qu'on applique métaphoriquement le nom de Loi*] to the movements not only of Animals but also of Inanimate Things, [movements] which are produced as a consequence of a natural order that does not change [*produits en conséquence d'un ordre naturel qui ne change point*].⁵⁷

The ancient thinkers may not have cared much for any naturalistic fallacy and thus reasoned in metaphorical terms by representing nature as the moral authority providing the 'right' interpretation or explanation. But Spinoza, who well realizes the confusion resulting from using 'metaphors',⁵⁸ advances an essential difference between moral right and natural power and, accordingly, the immanent need and desire to persevere in interpretation, meaning permanent translation. The *sive* does not simply impose a new metaphor to end the debate, but it inversely incites translating power to persevere in the interpretation, reading, and transformation of language and thought, that is, the metamorphosis of translation. This is the process in which Barbeyrac sought to orient himself through the years and editions while translating Pufendorf's refutation of the *TTP*. Barbeyrac's work is not just a metaphor for how he interprets and understands Spinoza. By carefully engaging with the *TTP* and its reception history, Barbeyrac's work is itself in metamorphosis as it too participates in permanent translation and the desire for Spinozism.

read: 'Es wird aber die Richtigkeit derer Spinosischen Folgerungen deutlicher herfür leuchten, wenn man sie mit Übergehung aller Weitläufigkeiten also fürstellt: [...].'

⁵⁵ The situation animating Barbeyrac could be paraphrased by an incisive remark of Tosel (*Spinoza ou le crépuscule de la servitude*, p. 165): 'Spinoza is not afraid of the equivocation [*l'équivoque*] he seems to entertain: this is not his matter, but that of the reader, not yet truly a philosopher and always believing in being reasonable.'

⁵⁶ See Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1734), II.2.§ 3, p. 178 (n. 7).

⁵⁷ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1734), II.2.§ 3, p. 178 (n. 7).

⁵⁸ See *TTP* VII, G III.100–01; *TTP* XII, G III.162; *TTP* XIII, G III.172; *TTP* XV, G III.181. As I have noted above, Spinoza takes the metaphoric operations of traditional natural law theory and politics into account in order to expose them, seeing the 'theoretical', illusionary force of such operations, see *TTP* XVII, G III.201. The transfer or 'translation' concerned (*translatio*) posits truth using a metaphor while dissimulating the transformational process that is actually taking place, see also Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté*, pp. 295–96.

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Pufendorf also refutes the *TTP* in the fourth chapter of the third book of the *DJN*, where the duty to keep promises and other kinds of obligations towards humans are discussed. This is where Pufendorf states that those who oppose the consensus between all nations and ages and who pride themselves on their supposed wisdom are bound to fall into ‘une erreur aussi pernicieuse & aussi détestable que l’Athéisme,’ as Barbeyrac translates.⁵⁹ Correspondingly, after discussing Hobbes, the other supposedly wise thinker, Pufendorf continues the discussion by bringing in Spinoza and commenting on the *TTP*.⁶⁰ The commentary concerns the divine law of religion, which is absent from Spinoza’s understanding of the state of nature and natural law. This does not make sense to Pufendorf, who considers that religion and theology, which entail the revelation of God’s authority, are essential to natural law and moral obligation.⁶¹ In his otherwise faithful translation, Barbeyrac omits only the two concluding sentences of the commentary, which are anyway redundant as they only repeat Pufendorf’s position on the obligations towards God and humans.⁶² However, right before the translation of this whole passage on Spinoza’s specifically ‘atheist’ natural law, Barbeyrac does add a long footnote in which he elaborates his own thoughts on atheism.⁶³ To do so, Barbeyrac finds support with the Huguenots Pierre Bayle and Jacques Bernard, who discern different kinds of atheists, contrary to Pufendorf, whose ideas on this subject ‘do not seem very different from the common hypothesis of Theologians who judge on a matter by Metaphysical reasoning [*décident d’une chose de fait par des raisonnemens Métaphysiques*] without taking the experience into account’.⁶⁴ Indeed, Barbeyrac reasons on the basis of his theological-political experience of living as a French Protestant under royal persecution, a stateless refugee deprived of all rights. But as Barbeyrac is decided to live by at least one right and freedom, namely the freedom of the conscience, he thus strives to engage in this freedom most fully, desiring it most immanently, meaning most powerfully and usefully, even if this would take him beyond the orders of the law. Accordingly, Barbeyrac is not afraid to put things in question:

But if Atheists, whether *of the mind* or *of the heart*, do not interfere in dogmatizing [*mais si les Athées, soit de l’esprit, ou du cœur, ne se mêlent point de dogmatizer*], to what good and virtue should they be punished exactly and right away for being Atheists? It seems to me that the nature and purpose of the Punishments imposed by Human Tribunals inflict do not require that they be used against such people. They are punished enough by their own impiety, presuming that they persevere in it until death.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), III.4. § 4, pp. 323–24.

⁶⁰ See Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), III.4. § 4, p. 391.

⁶¹ Olsthoorn, ‘Grotius and Pufendorf’, pp. 52–55.

⁶² Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), III.4. § 4, p. 391; Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), III.4. § 4, p. 325.

⁶³ See Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), III.4. § 4, pp. 323–24 (n. 1).

⁶⁴ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), III.4. § 4, p. 324 (n. 1).

⁶⁵ Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens* (1706), III.4. § 4, p. 324 (n. 1).

Barbeyrac suggests the uncommon idea that even atheists enjoy a certain freedom of conscience as long as they do not preach and teach their impious convictions to others. Even atheists may freely think from the mind and speak from the heart. The strategic place of Barbeyrac's suggestion and the suggestion itself make the whole appear as a trace to the 'atheist' author of the *TTP*, the advocate of the freedom of philosophizing. Following this trace, the translation of Pufendorf's refutation of Spinoza seems to carry side thoughts on the impossibility of a moral law without religion. After all, Barbeyrac is not satisfied with mere metaphysical reasoning and insists on taking the experience into account, namely his own theological-political experience of legal persecution based on an allegedly divine right. Experience has shown Barbeyrac that the law also oppresses and that the question of human life is not just moral or ethical but also political. Hence, Barbeyrac thinks and translates more carefully, complicating the right to human freedom while defending it more decidedly than ever as the freedom of the conscience. But if only the conscience is truly free, free thought and speech will be measured by it, and the freedom of philosophizing will be brought into a fortress of morality, indeed the conscience. Barbeyrac realizes that Spinoza's free philosophizing opens up the debate between citizens for any natural law theory to be critiqued together with its corresponding idea of human nature, thus historically exposing and transforming morality and the conscience. While Spinoza and the Spinozists may think and speak as they do, Barbeyrac does not accept the subversion of human nature and value, which are located in the conscience and legitimized by reason and not simply the result of the play of passions. All in all, Spinoza is not a useful ally but a rebel destroying human freedom. This is how almost three decades after his first edition of the *DJN*, Barbeyrac concludes his study of Spinoza, ending the permanent translation of Pufendorf's refutation of the *TTP*:

But it is clear that Spinoza and those who in one way or another follow his ideas entirely destroy the Freedom of Human Actions and thereby at the same time every kind of Law and Morality [*la Liberté des Actions Humaines, & par-là en même temps toute sorte de Droit & de Moralité*]. Thus it is useless to argue with such people as long as we do not agree on what is the subject of the argument. We must allow them the pleasure of believing that whatever they do by giving in to their passions, they follow all the better Natural Law, which they willingly submit to the invincible inclination that drives them.⁶⁶

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