

On Looking for Truth: Spinoza after Descartes

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1 The Puzzle of Self-evidence

For anyone who has grown pessimistic about the prospect of ever understanding Spinoza, it is perhaps ironic that Spinoza himself holds that truth is self-evident, manifest, luminous. As he puts it, “truth requires no sign [*veritas nullo eget signo*]” (TIE 36/G II 15); “truth is its own standard [*veritas sui sit norma*]”; someone who has a true idea “cannot doubt the truth of the thing”; and “a true idea involves the highest certainty” (E2p43&s/G II 123–125, cf. KV 2.15/G I 178–179). As a first pass, the thought seems to be that if you *do* have a true idea, there is nothing else you need to know or do in order to also *know* that the idea is true: there is no need for a comparison with the external world, or for vetting against some prior standard, no need to look for some mark of truth beyond the idea itself. To the question “how [...] can [someone] know that he has an idea that agrees with its object?” Spinoza replies with almost distressing serenity: “this arises solely from his having an idea that does agree with its object” (E2p43s/G II 124–125).

Spinoza’s position would have been easier to accept if it were just a claim about *foundational* truths alone. Perhaps a philosophical system must indeed bottom out in something self-evident, on pain of an infinite regress. His doctrine would also have been easier to accept if it had expressed merely an ideal or standard of genuinely *scientific* true ideas: on such a reading, true ideas form a bona fide science once we can no longer doubt them (perhaps because of the strength of the inferential links between them). But Spinoza’s claim appears to be a claim about the nature of truths *generally*: it is any and all truths, even the most ordinary ones, that, it seems, are supposed to “requir[e] no sign”, “involve[e] the highest certainty” and “cannot [be subjected to] doubt.”

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In what follows I'll refer to this set of claims as Spinoza's 'doctrine of self-evidently true ideas.' Other scholars have offered compelling and insightful interpretations of this doctrine.¹ But it seems to me that an important—ontological—aspect of it continues to be overlooked. This paper tries to address this lacuna and so supplement extant readings by sketching a new interpretative direction that might help shed more light on the meaning of Spinoza's doctrine and on his reasons for asserting it. The paper that follows focuses in particular on filling in our picture of what *true ideas must themselves be like*, such that they require no external sign of their truth but, nonetheless, leave no room for doubt.²

2 Intrinsic Denominations as Clarity and Distinctness

As a first step toward solving our puzzle it is helpful (and relatively uncontroversial) to consider Spinoza's doctrine of self-evidently true ideas alongside his notion of "adequate idea." As is well known, Spinoza holds that true ideas not only "extrinsically" "agree with" (as a first pass, correspond to) the objects they purport to represent, but also have certain "intrinsic," or nonrelational, properties.³ In Spinoza's own words,

By adequate idea I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations of a true idea [*quatenus in se sine relatione ad obiectum consideratur, omnes verae ideae proprietates sive denominationes intrinsecas habet*]. Exp.: I say intrinsic to exclude what is extrinsic, viz. the agreement of the idea with its object [*convenientiam ideae cum suo ideato*]. (E2def4/G II 85, cf. Ep. 60/G IV 270–271)

Putting Spinoza's various claims together, it seems plausible to infer that it is the fact that true ideas have certain "intrinsic denominations" that makes them indubitable and frees us from having to look for some further "sign" of their truth outside the ideas themselves. So understood, the problem of

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- 1 See e.g., Martha Brandt Bolton, "Spinoza on Cartesian Doubt," *Noûs* 19, no. 3 (1985): 379–95. doi: [10.2307/2214948](https://doi.org/10.2307/2214948); John Carriero, "Descartes (and Spinoza) on Intellectual Experience and Skepticism," *Descartes' Epistemology Special Issue, Roczniki Filozoficzne* 68, no. 2 (2020): 21–42. doi: [10.18290/rf20682-2](https://doi.org/10.18290/rf20682-2); Don Garrett, "Truth, Method and Correspondence in Spinoza and Leibniz," in *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy*, ed. Don Garrett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 176–98; Dominik Perler, "Spinoza on Skepticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 220–39; Kristin Primus, "Reflective Knowledge," in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2021), 265–275; Stephan Schmid, "Spinoza Against the Skeptics," in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2021), 276–285.
 - 2 I leave for another paper the closely-related discussion of Spinoza's commitment to the necessity of second-order knowledge of the truth of our ideas (E2p43s/G II 124–125, E2p21s/G II 109). Spinoza is explicit that these higher-order ideas are *not* necessary for us to know the truth about things with certainty (TIE 34/G II 14–15). As Carriero puts it, "The first order lucid experience suffices to 'remove all doubt'" (Carriero, "Descartes," 35; cf. Diane Steinberg, "Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 258–283).
 - 3 On textual grounds, I'm assuming that for Spinoza all true ideas are adequate and all adequate ideas are true (see e.g. E2p43d/G II 123–124, E3p58d/G II 187–188, E4p62d/G II 257).

illuminating Spinoza's doctrine of self-evidently true ideas maps onto the problem of identifying the "intrinsic denominations" of true ideas.

So what might these mysterious "intrinsic denominations" be? Given Spinoza's well-known debt to Descartes, it seems plausible, at least *prima facie*, to identify them with Cartesian "clarity and distinctness," or some variation thereon, as many scholars have done.⁴ Indeed, Spinoza sometimes explicitly suggests the equivalence of "adequacy" and "clarity and distinctness" by linking these descriptors with "*sive*."⁵ To recall, according to Descartes, a clear and distinct idea presents the nature of a thing both clearly ("accessibl[y] to the attentive mind") and distinguishes it—"separate[s]" it—from the natures of other things (*Principles* 1.45/AT VIIIA 22). On interpretations that identify "intrinsic denominations" of Spinozistic true ideas with Cartesian clarity and distinctness, these intrinsic denominations are understood as *phenomenal*, in principle introspectable, properties of ideas.

How exactly *Descartes* understands clarity and distinctness is of course its own controversy. But importing these concepts into Spinoza's framework generates additional complications. In particular, given his rejection of providential reasoning, Spinoza cannot appeal (as Descartes does) to a benevolent creator to explain what makes make a feeling of certainty epistemically reliable. Without a good God in place, why should ideas appear clear and distinct to me only when I do in fact manage to form a correct picture of the world? To put this in terms of Spinoza's definition of adequate idea, why should an idea's extrinsic "agreement" with how things are in the world necessarily run in tandem with certain intrinsic properties of that idea? Indeed, this last worry is a worry about Spinoza's account of adequate ideas whether or not we understand their intrinsic denominations as clarity and distinctness.

Don Garrett's version of the clarity and distinctness reading of Spinoza's intrinsic denominations has a particularly compelling response to this kind of concern.⁶ He proposes that we understand Spinozistic clarity and distinctness (and so Spinozistic intrinsic denominations of true ideas) as *introspectable consistency*. That is, on this reading, Spinozistic ideas are clear and distinct, and so self-evidently true, when they present us with genuine possibles. It is this presentation of genuine possibles—i.e., of internally consistent representational contents—that, on Garrett's reading, renders Spinozistic true ideas clear and distinct and thereby endows them with the "intrinsic denominations" proper to true ideas.

Garrett's proposal has several virtues. The first is that, rather than equating the perception of clarity and distinctness with some merely psychological, further inexplicable and unjustifiable, feeling of certainty, he grounds this perception in specific epistemic relations—namely, in the (at least in principle) introspectable internal consistency of an idea's representational contents. A second notable virtue of Garrett's reading is that, as he himself notes, it can explain why ideas with certain "intrinsic denominations" must also have the "extrinsic denomination" of "agreeing" with what they purport to represent, as Spinoza's definition of adequate idea requires. Given Spinoza's

4 E.g. Garrett, *Truth*; Steinberg, "Knowledge"; Carriero, "Descartes," 32. On Spinoza's relation to Descartes in the context of E2p43s/G II 124–125, reflective knowledge, or skepticism see also e.g. Bolton, "Spinoza"; Carriero, "Descartes"; Primus, "Reflective Knowledge."

5 See E1p8s2/G II 50, E2p36/G II 117–118, E2p38c/G II 119. Cf. E2p43s/G II 125.

6 Garrett, "Truth."

necessitarianism,⁷ the actual world is also the only logically consistent world; so, all genuine possibles are also necessarily actual. Hence, all internally consistent ideas necessarily correspond to what is in fact the case in the world.

Yet, for all the merits of Garrett's version of the intrinsic-denominations-as-clarity-and-distinctness reading, it seems to me that there are also reasons to hesitate before adopting such a reading, or indeed any reading that simply identifies Spinoza's "intrinsic denominations" of true ideas with Cartesian clarity and distinctness. For there are some basic disanalogies in how Spinoza and Descartes understand clarity and distinctness.

First, Spinoza's reasoning seems to run in the opposite direction from Descartes.' The Cartesian "rule," recall, is that "whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true"⁸. Spinoza in contrast seems to be saying that *any* true idea will have certain "intrinsic denominations," and so, on the proposed interpretation of those denominations, that *any* true idea will also be clear and distinct. These are very different claims, with very different implications. The Cartesian rule says, roughly, that I can take a certain in-principle introspectable property of ideas as a reliable sign of their truth, but Descartes makes no claim—as Spinoza does—that *all* true ideas must, by virtue of their truth, also be clear and distinct. Descartes's rule, unlike Spinoza's, is in principle consistent with very few true ideas—indeed, with no true ideas—being clear and distinct. This asymmetry in how Descartes and Spinoza relate clarity and distinctness to truth suggests that Cartesian clarity and distinctness might not be what Spinoza has in view when ascribing "intrinsic denominations" to all true ideas.

Here is a second disanalogy in Spinoza's and Descartes's respective handling of clarity and distinctness. Recall that on Spinoza's theory of ideas, many adequate ideas are mere *components* of more complex *inadequate* ideas. Consider, for example, the idea of "extension" (that is, roughly, of physical nature). Spinoza holds that it is metaphysically impossible for any mind to form an *inadequate* idea of extension (or any other "common notions," i.e. notions of what is "equally in the part and in the whole").⁹ But in most cases this necessarily adequate idea of extension is only one part of a more composite *inadequate* idea: it's part of false beliefs about and confused experiences of bodies, and of entire false physical theories. For instance, by Spinoza's lights, both Scholastic and Cartesian natural philosophy gets the nature of the physical world wrong. Nonetheless, given Spinoza's commitment to the adequacy of all common notions, the Scholastic and Cartesian philosophers who uphold these false physical theories also necessarily possess adequate ideas of extension. Or consider Spinoza's own example of an ordinary inadequate idea: a child who imagines a "winged horse," affirms its "existence," and regards it "as present" (E2p49s/G II 31–36). Sadly, the child's belief is false—it does not "agree" with how things really are. Yet, again, on Spinoza's account, this daydreaming child also has a necessarily adequate idea of what it is to be extended. To give one final example: on a Spinozistic analysis, the humdrum, inexplicit know-how of successfully shielding one's eyes from the glare of the sun is also a case of having a composite inadequate idea: a necessarily

7 See e.g. E1p29/G II 70–71.

8 Med. 3, AT VII 35, in René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes. Volume II*, edited and translated by John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 35.

9 See E2p38ff/G II 118ff. I discuss common notions in more detail in Karolina Hübner, "Spinoza on universals," in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell 2021), 204–13.

adequate idea of extension is part of this composite, but so is the perception—the inadequate “imaginary” idea—of the sun as a small bright oval.

Now, all three of these cases seem to me to qualify, from a Spinozistic perspective, as cases of having an adequate occurrent idea of extension, and so of having a self-evident idea with all the “intrinsic denominations” proper to true ideas. Yet it also seems that we are quite far here from how *Descartes* understands what it means to have an occurrent “clear and distinct” idea. For Descartes, clear and distinct ideas are, paradigmatically, an achievement of careful and methodical reflection, and deliver metaphysical insights into the true natures of things, making these explicitly available for further reflection. Most importantly, as noted above, a clear and distinct Cartesian idea of the nature of a thing is supposed to present that nature not just clearly—“accessibl[y] to the attentive mind”—but also as distinguished—“separated”—from the natures of other things. But none of the above three scenarios do that. In none of the three is the content of the adequate idea of extension—the nature of extension—phenomenally available to the thinker. The daydreaming child, the blinded person, the Cartesian physicist, all have this idea but only as an undiscriminated—undistinguished and unseparated—part of an inadequate and confused whole.

The point is not simply that for Spinoza having a self-evident idea with all the “intrinsic denominations” of true ideas seems very unlike what Descartes envisions when he discusses clear and distinct ideas. More importantly for our purposes, it seems that for Spinoza having a self-evident idea with certain “intrinsic denominations” is *not* necessarily a claim about what is experienced by the thinking subject (the daydreaming child, the Cartesian physicist, the blinded person)—it is not necessarily a claim about the phenomenal qualities of the idea. This is despite Spinoza’s explicit use of *sive* in certain passages to link adequacy with clarity and distinctness.¹⁰

In short, it seems to me that Spinozistic adequate ideas aren’t necessarily or generally coextensive with phenomenally clear and distinct ideas.¹¹ There is adequacy without phenomenal clarity and distinctness.

3 The Ontology of Intrinsic Denominations

In the foregoing I’ve tried to point out some of the disanalogies that suggest that there is something else going on in Spinoza’s notion of “intrinsic denominations” of true ideas than Cartesian “clarity and distinctness.” More generally, I tried to suggest that phenomenal properties like the clarity and distinctness of our ideas cannot be what Spinoza has in mind when he ascribes certain “intrinsic denominations” to all true ideas.

I want to now turn to another reason why we should not treat these “intrinsic denominations” as phenomenal properties, such as clarity and distinctness. This is that this line of interpretation neglects an important element of Spinoza’s characterizations of the manifestness of true ideas and

10 This seems to me to bolster Curley’s argument that *sive* shouldn’t be uniformly read as indicating a simple identification. See Edwin Curley, “*Sive*,” in *Spinoza Cambridge Lexicon*, eds. Karolina Hübner and Justin Steinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

11 For the claim that adequate and clear/distinct ideas are coextensive for Spinoza see Garrett, “Truth,” 177–178. Cf. Steinberg, “Knowledge.”

of their intrinsic denominations. This neglected element is the *ontological* nature of these characterizations. This ontological element renders any account of intrinsic denominations (and so of the self-evidence of true ideas) in purely phenomenal terms at the very least incomplete.

In what follows I want to propose that Spinoza's doctrine of self-evidently true ideas is in fact first and foremost an *ontological* doctrine. This is in the specific sense that the "intrinsic denominations" of true ideas should be understood, I suggest, as fundamentally the *reality or being* that such ideas present us with. Furthermore, I'll propose that it is because true Spinozistic ideas present us directly with *things themselves* that at bottom explains why we do not need to check for a sign of truth outside the ideas, nor for their correspondence with how things are in the world.

In the remainder of the paper, I want to flesh out this proposal, situate it within Spinoza's larger epistemological framework, and present the relevant textual evidence. I will also suggest that although Spinozistic intrinsic denominations are irreducible to clarity and distinctness, clarity and distinctness do have a secondary or supplementary role to play in Spinoza's account of the self-evidence of true ideas.

Let me start with the textual evidence for this ontological reading. Consider first the following passage from the early TIE, which explicitly links "intrinsic denominations" with the "reality" contained in ideas:

As for what constitutes the form of the true, it is certain that a true thought is distinguished from a false one not only by an extrinsic, but chiefly by an intrinsic denomination [*non tantum per denominationem extrinsecam, sed maxime per intrinsecam distingui*] [...] From this it follows that there is something real in ideas, through which the true are distinguished from the false [*Unde sequitur in ideis dari aliquid reale, per quod verae a falsis distinguuntur*]. (TIE 69–70/G II 26).

Second, it is also in such explicitly ontological terms that Spinoza discusses the "intrinsic denominations" of true ideas in E2p43s, the very passage in the *Ethics* where Spinoza asserts, as we saw at the beginning of this paper, the "highest certainty" and indubitability of true ideas. In that same scholium Spinoza protests that if true ideas differed from false ideas solely by the "extrinsic denomination" of "agreement" with the object (or lack thereof), they would not differ in the degree or amount of "reality or perfection" they contained. But, he says, "it is established [...] hat the true is related to the false as being is to nonbeing."¹² That is, the scholium implies, true ideas must contain more reality or being than false ideas and to do so is an intrinsic denomination of such ideas. Like the definition of "adequate idea" cited above, this passage contrasts true ideas' "extrinsic" property of "agreement" with the represented "object" on the one hand, and their "intrinsic" properties on

12 Here is the passage: "if a true idea is distinguished from a false one [NS: not insofar as it is said to be a mode of thinking, but] only insofar as it is said to agree with its object, then a true idea has no more reality or perfection than a false one (since they are distinguished only through the extrinsic denomination, [NS: and not through the intrinsic denomination])—and so, does the man who has true ideas [NS: have any more reality or perfection] than him who has only false ideas? [...] To these questions, I say, I think I have already replied. For as far as the difference between a true and a false idea is concerned, it is established from [2]p35 that the true is related to the false as being is to nonbeing" (E2p43s/G II 124–125). ("NS" marks additions from a posthumous Dutch edition of Spinoza's works.)

the other. But whereas E2def4 left us guessing as to what these mysterious “intrinsic denominations” might be, in this later scholium Spinoza is quite explicit that he has in mind the amount or degree of “reality” (or, equivalently, “perfection” or “being”).

Let me pause briefly in the cataloguing of textual evidence to situate the emerging picture within Spinoza’s larger epistemological framework. When he glosses “intrinsic denominations” of true ideas in terms of having “more reality” and containing “something real” as he does in E2p43s and TIE 70, he has in view arguably what the Scholastic and Cartesian philosophical tradition of the day often referred to as “objective reality.”¹³ To put matters in more contemporary terms, for any idea, we can distinguish the “objective reality” of the idea as its *representational content*, from this idea’s “formal reality” as its nature as a *mental act*. Now, for our purposes, the crucial point is that on this theory of representation, at least as interpreted by Spinoza and Descartes, a *true* idea of a thing presents us with the thing itself, albeit existing in the manner of a purely mental object—that is, existing with “objective” reality (the reality of an object-of-thought), rather than with the “formal” reality that would characterize this thing’s mind-independent existence in the world. For example, to quote a well-worn passage from Descartes,

An *idea is the thing which is thought of* insofar as it has objective being in the intellect [...] [T]he idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect—not [...] formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect [*eo modo quo objecta in intellectu esse solent*] (AT 7.102/CSM 2:74; emphasis added).

In short, on this way of understanding representation, a *true* idea of a thing is one in which the *thing itself* exists in the idea. The objective reality of a true idea is then just the reality or being of what that idea represents: the reality or being of the sun in the case of a true idea of the sun, the reality or being of a horse in the case of a true idea of a horse. And I think it is precisely in terms of things themselves existing in true ideas—that is, in terms of the objective reality of true ideas—that we should understand Spinoza’s claims that there is “something real” in true ideas, and that such ideas contain “reality or perfection.”

With the terminology of “objective reality” or “objective being” on the table, we can return to the cataloguing of textual evidence in support of the ontological interpretation of Spinoza’s doctrine. Consider next another passage from the TIE where Spinoza writes,

13 To speak of ‘the’ tradition grossly oversimplifies things. Scholastic and post-Descartes treatments of this concept both varied a great deal from thinker to thinker. See e.g., Han Thomas Adriaenssen, *Representation and Scepticism from Aquinas to Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On the importance of objective reality in Spinoza’s philosophy, see e.g. John Carriero, “Remarks on Cognition in Spinoza: Understanding, Sensation, and Belief,” in *De Natura Rerum: Scripta in honorem professoris Olli Koistinen sexagesimum annum complentis* [Reports from the Department of Philosophy, vol. 38], eds. Hemmo Laiho and Arto Repo (Turku: University of Turku Press, 2016), 134–147; Don Garrett, “Representation, Misrepresentation, and Error in Spinoza’s Philosophy of Mind,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018), 190–203; Karolina Hübner, “Representation and Mind-Body Identity in Spinoza’s Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 60, no. 1 (2022): 47–77. doi: 10.1353/hph.2022.0002; Primus, “Reflective Knowledge.”

a true idea of Peter is an objective essence of Peter, and something real in itself [*vera...idea Petri est essentia Petri obiectiva, et in se quid reale*]. [...] [I]t is clear that certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself, i.e., the mode by which we are aware of [*modus quo sentimus*] the formal essence is certainty itself. And from this, again, it is clear that, for the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea. For as we have shown, in order for me to know, it is not necessary to know that I know. From which, once more, it is clear that no one can know what the highest certainty is unless he has an adequate idea or objective essence of some thing. For certainty and an objective essence are the same thing. [...] [T]ruth, therefore, requires no sign, but it suffices, in order to remove all doubt, to have the objective essences of things, or, what is the same, ideas [*veritas nullo eget signo, sed sufficiat habere essentias rerum obiectivas, aut, quod idem est, ideas*] (Tie 34–36/G II 14–15)

We could hardly ask for a more explicit identification of the self-evidential nature of true ideas, of the “certainty” proper to them, with these ideas’ possession of objective reality (here more specifically of the objective *essence* of the thing being represented). It is because a true idea of Peter contains the objective reality of Peter’s essence that, Spinoza writes, it has the “highest certainty” and its truth “requires no sign”; nothing more is needed to “remove all doubt” about the truth of that idea.

Passages such as these seem to me to constitute quite powerful evidence in favor of what I’ve been calling the ‘ontological interpretation’ of “intrinsic denominations” and so also of Spinoza’s doctrine of manifestly true ideas. More precisely, my proposal is that it is the objective reality of true ideas that is the relevant “intrinsic denomination” of true ideas, the denomination that renders them self-evidently true without the need to search elsewhere for marks of truth or to check for correspondence with external states of affairs. On the reading I’m proposing, in short, Spinoza’s reference to the “intrinsic denominations” of true ideas is fundamentally a reference to their objective reality, to the being or *res* that a true idea presents us with. This give us the basic sense, I propose, in which true Spinozistic ideas are impossible to doubt: doubting makes no sense if, according to our theory of representation, in thinking we are staring things themselves in the face.

4 Completeness

The proposal requires the following qualification. My claim *isn’t* that it is objective reality *simpliciter* that is the “intrinsic denomination” of Spinozistic true ideas responsible for their self-evidence or indubitability. For *inadequate* Spinozistic ideas also have a representational content, i.e. present us with *some* objective reality. There is “something real” also in the child’s confused fantasy of flying horses. So although the objective reality of an idea is, I suggest, *fundamentally* what Spinoza has in mind when he describes true ideas as endowed with “intrinsic denominations,” to say only this much doesn’t yet fully explain how objective reality can function as the “intrinsic denomination” of manifestly true ideas.

My proposal, more precisely, is that manifestly true ideas present us not with just any old bit of objective reality but with *complete* objective reality. In the *Ethics* Spinoza explains the difference between adequate and inadequate ideas in terms of their relative completeness, writing that when my idea of a thing contains all that a perfect knower—an omniscient intellect—thinks in thinking

of that same thing, then my idea of it is “adequate,” rather than being merely “partial” or “mutilated.”¹⁴ As other scholars have noted, we have a fairly good idea of the general principle Spinoza seems to have in mind here: a complete idea of a thing is an idea that includes all that on which the thing represented depends *causally*.¹⁵ That is, for an adequate idea to grasp a thing “completely” means to grasp it together with all its causes and constituents. To put this still differently, the idea must contain all the reasons for this thing necessarily being as it is—the idea can’t be like an isolated correct conclusion detached from its premises.

So, to return to the question of the difference in the objective reality of adequate versus inadequate ideas, the objective reality of an adequate—and manifestly so—idea of x is the complete objective reality of x : the objective reality of x together with the objective reality of all of x ’s causes and constituents. This completeness is arguably at least part of what Spinoza has in mind when he says, in a passage from the scholium with which we opened, that to have a true idea of some thing is to know that thing “perfectly, or in the best way” (E2p43s/G II 124–125). The “perfect” knowledge of a thing is complete knowledge of that thing. (From this perspective it’s also somewhat easier to grant Spinoza that all minds possess an adequate idea of extension: since the idea of extension is an idea of an essential nature of God, and God is conceived through himself alone (E1def3/G II 45), a complete representation of extension requires very few premises.)

We are now arguably in a better position to see why true ideas—understood as *complete* ideas—are *manifestly* true. For the completeness of such ideas furnishes, it seems to me, a very specific reason why such ideas are not subject to doubt—a reason that is not merely psychological but, more fundamentally, epistemic. Namely, we can now understand the self-evidence or indubitability of true ideas as a matter of what is still *thinkable* about the thing of which we have formed a complete idea. As a complete idea, an adequate idea of a thing includes, as we saw, all the reasons why this thing necessarily has the properties it does. So there is no predicate F , such that we could still ask whether and why x must be F or $\neg F$. So no coherent doubt about the thing we are representing seems possible any longer. (It’s another question altogether how many such complete ideas we are capable of forming.)

We should also note here the following consequence of Spinoza’s belief that *all* ideas, even inadequate ones, present *some* objective reality, some bit of reality. This means that even the most inadequate ideas put us directly in relation to reality, in however partial a manner. This seems to be just what ideas qua ideas do, on Spinoza’s view: they present us directly with things themselves, even if often—in the case of inadequate ideas—merely with fragments of things. But this means that there is a certain kind of epistemic *optimism* built into Spinoza’s theory of ideas: there is a built-in limit on how wrong we can go in our thinking, since even our most *inadequate* ideas manage to latch onto reality. This sort of epistemic optimism becomes more plausible once we factor in Spinoza’s bigger metaphysical picture of thought, and in particular the fact that for him all ideas are ultimately thought by an infallible divine thinker. Our own ideas are only a “part” of this omniscient set of ideas (E2p11c/G II 94–95). Hence when Spinoza poses his million-dollar question—“how a man

14 Here is the passage: “when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human Mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human Mind, then we say that the human Mind perceives the thing only partially, or inadequately” (E2p11c/G II 94–95).

15 E.g. E1ax4/G II 46, E2p7/G II 89–90, E2p28d/G II 113.

can know that he has an idea that agrees with its object?”—his answer does not end with the response already recorded above, namely that “this arises solely from his having an idea that does agree with its object”; he also appends a big-picture clarification: “Add to this that our mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God” (E2p43s/G II 124–125).¹⁶

That even incomplete ideas present us with some of what is real also suggests, finally, that truth, adequacy, and self-evidence might all be scalar notions for Spinoza, i.e. that all these epistemic phenomena come in *degrees*: all ideas are more-or-less true and adequate and even, to the degree that they are more or less complete, more or less coherently doubttable, and so, if the above account of self-evidence is correct, more or less manifestly true.¹⁷ As indirect textual support for this conclusion we can cite here Spinoza’s description of his own doctrine of self-evidently true ideas—a doctrine he surely regards as a true idea—as only “sufficiently [*satis*] manifest” (E2p43s/G II 124–125) to his readers, rather than “manifest” simpliciter.

5 Clarity and Distinctness Once Again

Finally, let me return to the question of the role that clarity and distinctness may play in Spinoza’s account.

At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that there are reasons to demur from simply identifying clarity and distinctness with the “intrinsic denominations” of true Spinozistic ideas, as some readers have proposed. Later in the paper I offered an alternative—‘ontological’—interpretation of intrinsic denominations. However, I don’t disagree that clarity and distinctness have a role to play in Spinoza’s epistemological picture. In conclusion to this paper, I want to tentatively suggest that this role is not to constitute the intrinsic denominations of any individual true idea, but rather to describe *relations of ideas* to one another. More precisely, it seems to me that for Spinoza the notion of clarity and distinctness can be understood as a measure of the degree to which various *component* ideas—whether we are talking about the components of adequate or inadequate composite ideas—have been separated out and distinguished and their contents made phenomenally available to the subject thinking them.

We have already come across examples of *inadequate* composites: a necessarily adequate idea of extension can form only a small part of a much larger inadequate ideas of flying horses, or bogus physical theories.¹⁸ In such a case, an adequate component idea will *also* be clear and distinct when (and to the degree that) it is separated out and distinguished from fellow ideas that obscure it. For instance, when the daydreaming child is finally able to attend to her adequate idea of extension alone, separating it out from the rest of her thoughts, she will clearly and distinctly perceive the true nature of extension. It is such cases of inadequate composite ideas that Spinoza may have in mind when

16 Here I agree with Carriero, “Descartes,” 37. See Carriero’s paper for a much more detailed discussion of the importance of Spinoza’s mind-as-part commitment in quelling retroactive doubt, and of the parallels on that point with Descartes’s treatment of doubt.

17 I’m grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to consider the possibility of such a reading.

18 See also how Spinoza uses “clear and distinct” in E2p28d/G II 113 for example.

he remarks that certain ideas “are clear and distinct only to those who have no prejudices” (E2p40s1; G II 120).

Analogously, it seems that an *adequate* idea of x can nonetheless fail to also be clear and distinct when, despite its completeness—that is, despite the fact that this idea contains all of x ’s causes and constituents—we have not yet managed to *distinguish* those causes and constituents from one another. This may well be the case when we only grasp those causes in general terms, that is terms that don’t distinguish the individuals that fall under such terms.¹⁹ This may be the case with many of Spinoza’s own propositions. Consider his claim that each finite thing has an infinite series of prior finite causes (E1p28/G II 69). This idea is not just true but also arguably complete, in the sense of presenting—albeit only in very general and abstract terms—all the causes of any finite thing. It is adequate without being distinct.²⁰

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19 I’ve argued elsewhere (e.g. Hübner, “Spinoza”) that general and even abstract ideas can be true for Spinoza; for textual evidence see e.g. E4p62s/G II 257.

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