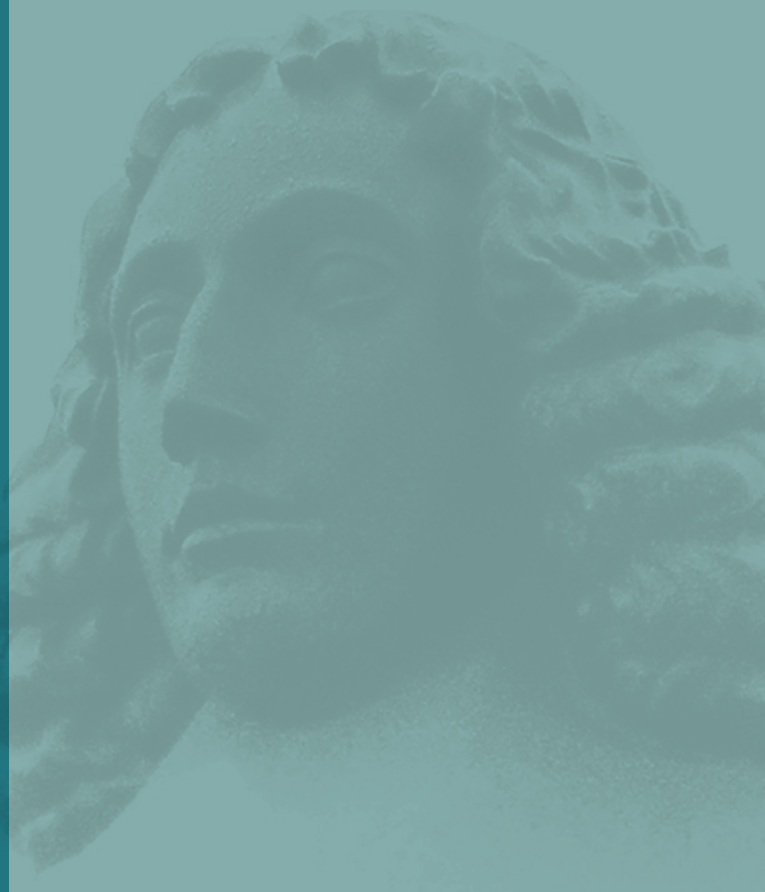


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Editors' Foreword

Kristin Primus & Andrea Sangiacomo

We are delighted to finally launch the *Journal of Spinoza Studies* (*JSS*), which we hope will quickly become one of the main forums for discussion of Spinoza and his work. The plural 'we' is particularly fitting for this occasion, since bringing this journal into being has been a collective effort from the very beginning. *JSS* has come to be through collaboration among the leading Spinoza scholars around the world serving on the editorial board, as well as with organizations including the Vereniging Het Spinozahuis (Netherlands), the Societas Spinozana (Italy), the Spinoza-Gesellschaft (Germany), the Seminario Spinoza (Spain), the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Humanities of Cuenca (Spain), and the Jerusalem Spinoza Center (Israel).

Spinoza's philosophy has never really been neglected: even if it was not admired or celebrated, it was at least treated as a system that needed to be refuted. Over the last half-century or so, there has been something of a renaissance in Spinoza studies, with scholars around the world and from across different disciplines and traditions offering more nuanced appraisals of Spinoza's daring arguments and bringing Spinoza's thought into conversations about contemporary problems in philosophy and cultural studies. From the mid-twentieth century to today, Spinoza has moved from the periphery of scholarship in early modern philosophy closer to its center.

Yet for some years now, there has not been a journal dedicated to discussion of Spinoza. We hope *JSS* will help fill the void left by the unfortunate loss of *Studia Spinozana*, which consistently published top-rate and wide-ranging scholarship from the mid-1980s to the late 1990's, and which published its last special issue in 2008. Like *Studia Spinozana*, *JSS* aims to publish cutting-edge research from the many traditions and diverse approaches to Spinoza scholarship.

The core values of *JSS* are accessibility and inclusivity. To ensure that everyone with an interest and an internet connection can read the journal, we have made it fully open access. And given that English is widely understood by most scholars, all articles will be published in English. But while articles eventually appear in English, they need not be written in English to be submitted and reviewed by *JSS*. We currently allow submissions written in Dutch, English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish; papers accepted after double-blind review are translated into English before publication. To make sure that many interpretive and philosophical traditions are represented in the

pages of *JSS*, we also take care to have a balanced peer-review policy, with referees coming from a variety of scholarly communities.

The inaugural issue of *JSS* looks to the future of Spinoza studies. We invited a small group of Spinoza scholars from around the globe to freely reflect on their own work and experience and speculate about where Spinoza studies may go (or *should* go) in the coming decades. As readers will observe, the contributions exhibit an array of perspectives and methods and sketch many distinct paths Spinoza scholars might explore further. We hope these pieces inspire readers to venture down these paths—or to take some entirely new path.

Kristin Primus (University of California, Berkeley)

Andrea Sangiacomo (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)

Abbreviations and conventions

References to texts by Spinoza are given in the main body of the paper in brackets (e.g., KV 2.1/G I 54).

Abbreviations

CM	<i>Cogitata Metaphysica</i>
DPP	<i>Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae</i>
E	<i>Ethica</i>
Ep	<i>Epistolae</i>
KV	<i>Korte Verhandling</i>
TIE	<i>Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione</i>
TP	<i>Tractatus Politicus</i>
TTP	<i>Tractatus Theologico-Politicus</i>

References to Gebhardt's *Spinoza Opera*: "G II 234" for Gebhardt, volume 2, page 234.

References to Pierre-François Moreau's *Œuvres complètes*: "O III 120" for volume 3, page 120. The corresponding reference to Gebhardt is included as well.

Citations of passages in the *Ethics* or DPP: "E2p40s2" for *Ethics*, part 2, proposition 40, second scholium. For the *Ethics*, the following abbreviations apply: a (axiom); app (appendix); c (corollary); d (demonstration); def (definition); exp (explanation); l (lemma); p (proposition); pref (preface); s (scholium). For the axioms, lemmata, etc. between E2p13s and E2p14, Curley's conventions are used (*Collected Works*, Volume 1, pp. 458-62).

Citations of passages in the CM: cited by part and chapter, followed by reference to Gebhardt.

Citations of passages in the TTP or TP: cited by chapter number and paragraph followed by reference to Gebhardt. E.g., TTP 16.15/G III 192.

Citations of passages in the KV: cited by part and chapter, followed by reference to Gebhardt. E.g., KV 1.2/G I 20.

Citations of passages in the TIE: cited by paragraph, and can be followed by page number in Gebhardt. E.g., TIE 36/G II 15.

For citations of passages in Ep: cited by supplying the letter number, sender and recipient, date, and the citations in Gebhardt. E.g., Ep 25, Oldenburg to Spinoza, 28 April 1665 (G IV 158).

References to Edwin Curley's English translation of Spinoza's works might be added to the above references, abbreviated with 'C' followed by page number. E.g., TTP 3.5/G III 47/C II 114. When no indication about the translation is given, it is implied that the translation used is Curley's.

The two volumes edited by Curley are:

C I: *The Collected Works of Spinoza. Volume 1.* Edited and Translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1985).

C II: *The Collected Works of Spinoza. Volume 2.* Edited and Translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Avenues from the Written *Ethics* Back to the Unwritten “Philosophy”

Gábor Boros*

Keywords: Neo-Platonism, *Ethics*, *sub specie aeternitatis*, Euclidean-style, Biblical-style.

1 *Philosophy and Articulated Ethics*

First of all, let me express my gratitude to the editors of the *Journal of Spinoza Studies* for the invitation to contribute to the first issue of the journal. I belong to the community of so-called “continental” philosophers, and accordingly, my interpretation of this task may be slightly different from an analytic interpretation. What the authors of this first issue of JSS are expected to do is not to present arguments regarding some well-discussed topics, but rather to map the most exciting avenues for future Spinoza research. My own way of doing this will be to propose a holistic vision concerning Spinoza’s philosophy. The main focus will be on the *Ethics*, but I will also touch upon some general methodological issues along the way.

I will present a vision of Spinoza’s philosophy as a whole, as well as some consequences of this vision. My main contention is that Spinoza’s frame of mind is Neo-Platonic: his system of philosophy presupposes a primordial vision in the sphere of a not-yet-explicated, implied unitary wisdom—i.e., what is *before* any articulation by conceptual and linguistic means. So understood, Spinoza follows the logic of Plotinus’s “On the three primary levels of reality.” I then consider the *articulated Ethics* and distinguish the layers of language-based cognition in Spinoza’s *œuvre*, in order to decipher the proper messages of particular passages more successfully. Basically, the *Ethics sub specie aeternitatis* should be distinguished from the *Ethics sub specie vitae cottidianae*. I compare the corresponding difference of these manners of thought and speech to the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic methods in Descartes. I maintain that Spinoza coupled the “synthetic” argumentation of the propositions and demonstrations with the series of other types of texts; in so doing he integrated the “analytic” part into the “synthetic.” I adopt the distinction of the TTP between Euclidean-style and Biblical-style books. Given that the *Ethics* is not written entirely in the Euclidean-style, I maintain that its major part allows for, and even calls for, investigation via the hermeneutical

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method for the Bible. Of course, the part Spinoza considered to be written in Euclid's style also allows for, and even calls for, being investigated in this way, but the reasons for this are different. The approach I propose can help us find support for a preferred interpretation, or help us rectify false interpretations informed by fashionable contemporary perspectives.

My starting point is the conviction that Spinoza's general frame of mind was Neo-Platonic in character. This statement does not contradict the thesis of the effective presence of Stoic and Epicurean elements in basic layers of Spinoza's thinking, a presence that has been convincingly demonstrated by excellent contributions to the Spinoza-scholarship of the last few decades.¹ What I propose to regard as a Neo-Platonic frame of mind can best be elucidated by way of a perhaps surprising new explanation of Spinoza's hints to an *unwritten* "Philosophy" beyond the *written Ethics*. In his remarks to the TIE, Spinoza famously refers to "his Philosophy" several times.² By traditional definition, what is called "Philosophy" is expected to be more comprehensive than what is called "Ethics." Therefore, we can plausibly think of Spinoza's "Philosophy" as his comprehensive system to be composed, in all probability, in geometric order. From the point of view of a comprehensive philosophy (in the sense of early modern philosophy), what we possess as Part I of today's *Ethics* can only be considered a rudimentary nucleus of the metaphysical or ontological foundation of this comprehensive system. Part II, which contains a rudimentary physics and a theory of cognition, and the other parts of the *Ethics* can also be attached to "elements" of a more comprehensive system.³

In this respect, Part II is of particular importance insofar as the wording of its short preface allows us to infer a comprehensive philosophy independently of the remarks in the TIE:

I pass now to explaining those things which must necessarily follow from the essence of God, or the infinite and eternal Being—not, indeed, all of them, for we have demonstrated (IP16) that infinitely many things must follow from it in infinitely many modes, but only those that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human Mind and its highest blessedness (E2pref/G II 84/C I 446).⁴

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- 1 For the thematic issue of the *Archives de philosophie* dedicated to the triad of Spinoza, Epicurus, and Gassendi, see Pierre-François Moreau, "Spinoza, Épicure, Gassendi," *Archives de Philosophie* 57, no. 3 (1994): 457–458. Concerning the Stoic legacy, see Susan James, "Spinoza the Stoic," in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, ed. Tom Sorell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 289–315; Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
 - 2 Two important examples: "By inborn power I understand what is not caused in us by external causes. I shall explain this afterwards in my Philosophy"; "Here they are called works. In my Philosophy, I shall explain what they are." See notes k and l, respectively, in TIE 31/G II 14/C I 17.
 - 3 This would be the "trunk" of the tree of philosophy which grows out of the "roots" as Metaphysics. For the "tree of philosophy" metaphor, see Descartes's *Lettre-préface* in the French edition of his *Principles of Philosophy* (AT IX, 14) in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume I*, eds. and trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 186.
 - 4 My emphasis. The fact that the ontology outlined in Part I enables a comprehensive physics does not imply, of course, that it presents a comprehensive ontology.

No readers of Part I of the *Ethics* who are familiar with traditional philosophical treatments of God⁵ will have any doubt that its author did not intend a complete and satisfactory treatment of "the essence of God, or the infinite and eternal Being" and the "infinitely many things [that] must follow from it in infinitely many modes." Like Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Part I of his *Principles of Philosophy*,⁶ Spinoza's *Ethics* Part I also presupposes a comprehensive metaphysical treatment of God. In both cases, this comprehensive treatment was unwritten and revealed only when objections were put forward by their contemporaries.⁷

One could certainly argue, however, that nothing prevented Spinoza from formulating a metaphysically comprehensive version of his "Philosophy," except the finitude of human life in general and the hardships of his own life in the midst of political, ideological, and personal turmoil. One can even guess that, most probably, this comprehensive work would have started from definitions, the first being that of the *causa sui*. The other definitions could be conceived to be arranged in a way different from what we now have as the series of definitions of Part I of the *Ethics*, and we could suppose that these definitions could, along with passages from the KV and the CM, provide his comprehensive ontology with its ingredients. If one argues along this line, there will be nothing distinctively Neo-Platonic in the reconstruction of this comprehensive "Philosophy," except randomly occurring elements from its Platonic heritage.

However, while such a fictitious reconstruction of a comprehensive work within the *œuvre* of Spinoza is possible, I have another, more courageous suggestion regarding the primordial version of Spinoza's comprehensive "system" of philosophy. The primordial character of this "system" is not chronological, the "system" is not a text at all, and it could not, even in principle, be written. What I have in mind is the Platonic unity of the not-yet-explicated, i.e., the implied and unarticulated unity of wisdom. As a matter of fact, this unitary wisdom *preceding all* articulation by conceptual and linguistic means would have been presupposed in his comprehensive "Philosophy," had he ever written it. Euclid's *Elements* of Geometry also presupposes this primordial wisdom that Spinoza inherited, as it were, when he took over the geometric order as the model for the systematization of his *Ethics*. This triadic structure consisting of 1) primordial unitary wisdom, 2) its conceptually-articulated form, and 3) its appearance in sense experience and the experienced bodily formations is what I consider profoundly Neo-Platonic in character. This is the logic that Plotinus's treatise "On the three primary levels of reality" (*Enneads* V, 1) describes and prescribes for both philosophers and theologians of Neo-Platonic affinity. These would eventually develop the logic of the double movement of *theophany* and *theosis* in the various forms we see in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the early Greek church fathers, followed by Johannes Scotus Eriugena's work on the divisions of Nature. Eriugena's work has been considered in Spinoza scholarship a possible source of the

5 Examples of such treatments are the *Summae* of Aquinas, Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, Hebreo's *Dialogues of Love*, and the *Metaphysical Disputations* of Suarez.

6 But unlike Hobbes' *Elements of Philosophy*, which deconstructs, rather than transforms, the traditional metaphysical treatment of God.

7 This is not to say, however, that their motives are similar. Descartes's reason for having a metaphysical treatment of God was to prepare the metaphysical foundation for his theory of knowledge and its application in his proto-scientific investigations. See Wolfgang Röd, *Descartes' Erste Philosophie. Versuch einer Analyse mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Cartesianischen Methodologie*. (Bonn: Bouvier, 1971). Spinoza's motivation was quite different, as I hope to show in the following.

distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. I will not attempt to broach the issue of the philological dependence of Spinoza on the Neo-Platonic tradition, although I agree with those who believe he had been influenced, at least indirectly, by it.⁸ Instead of detecting the traces of such an influence, I intend to point out the presence in Spinoza of the logic the thinkers belonging to this tradition employed when developing their systems.

If we apply this logic to the interpretation of the *Ethics*, definition 1 of Part I will appear as unitary wisdom's entrance into the world of human language-based cognition, the foundation-stone upon which the articulation of the unarticulated will be based, while the systematic-ontological (not textual) end of Part V (E5p40s⁹) will appear as its vanishing point, a return to the state of unarticulated unity: the world of separated particular beings (the individual intellects in E5p40s) becomes transcended towards the supra-particular unity (God's intellect in E5p40s). The entrance into and the exit from the world of articulations into both particular individuals and their differing habits and acts of conceptualisation occur in mutual dependence with their differing linguistic habits and acts. The so-called "definitions" of Part I, and especially the opening definition, serve the same purpose as those of the geometrical systematisations which they are taken over from formally. The function of both the geometrical and the Spinozan definitions is to begin articulating, in a form accessible to human language-based cognition, what is not and cannot in principle be articulated in its original form, namely, the primordial sphere of unitary wisdom.

In normal usage, a "definition" is taken to circumscribe a concept and thus prevent those who are in some dispute over it from missing each other's point from the very beginning. In Spinoza, however, the otherwise formal-logical tool is provided with an ontological meaning that precedes the formal-logical meaning. The definition becomes delimitation, setting limits in two directions: first, limitless unarticulated unitary wisdom (God's intellect, as it is called in 5p40s) is given limits through the employment of discrete linguistic-conceptual units prepared by the human intellect in order to grasp something of the unarticulated, which is otherwise out of reach; second, there is the *non plus ultra*, the utmost achievement of the highest-level human intellect considered as an articulating spiritual automata, as it were, the achievement reached in E5p40s, which "reveals" what it grasps. From this point of view, the verb *intelligo* of at least Definition 1 of Part I is essentially more than a routinely used, contingently-deployed, linguistic expression of a formal-logical statement. It is rather the act of the intellect whereby it creates concepts—an intellect, which, although human, is in its utmost achievement capable of reaching, even "constituting" "God's eternal and infinite intellect" (Ibid.). This act opens up or "reveals" the spheres of adequate cognition: in the (logically, not chronologically) first step, the intellectual, and in the (again, logically) second step, the rational. They are the backbone of the *Ethics*, the "ethics for eternity," so to speak, within the treatise that

8 After Freudenthal it became common to maintain some sort of influence of Eriugena, G. Bruno, and Leone Hebreo on Spinoza's crucial terms and teachings with respect to his immanentism or pantheism. See Jakob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's in Quellenschriften, Urkunden und Nichtamtlichen Nachrichten* (Leipzig: Veit & comp., 1899).

9 Especially the passage that follows: "[...] our Mind, insofar as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking, and this again by another, and so on, to infinity; so that together, they all constitute God's eternal and infinite intellect." E5p40s/G II 306/C I 615.

also contains the age-bound views of Spinoza, a self-identical mind-body unit living in a particular age.¹⁰

In my view, the most exciting avenues for future Spinoza research are the ones that lead us right to, but vanish before reaching, *das Unbetretene, nicht zu Betretende*—to give the floor for a moment to Goethe, an admirer of Spinoza.¹¹

2 Consequences for this Interpretation

It may seem that I wish to revive a mystical interpretation of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Against all appearance, however, there is nothing especially mystical in what I propose for future Spinoza research when emphasising the importance of the unwritten "counterpart" of the *Ethics*, or, more precisely, of Spinoza's "Philosophy." Having stated the pertinence of presupposing a "primordial" *Ethics*,¹² the task is not to submerge ourselves in it, gradually going mute as we reach deeper and deeper layers, as in the tradition of early Neo-Platonic and Christian concepts of *theosis*. Instead, I propose to have a fresh look at the *articulated Ethics* and Spinoza's other writings, in order to distinguish the various layers of language-based cognition and articulation in Spinoza's *œuvre* from sense-experience through reason to intellect as the main layers (while not forgetting such intermediary layers as the "provisional ethics" described in E5p10s or the complex biblical exegesis in TTP 7). If we take care not to confound the layers, we are in a better position to decipher the proper messages of particular passages.

When I talk about "messages" what I have in mind is not so much the intended message of Spinoza the particular person.¹³ Rather, I mean that a text can convey different messages if assigned to different layers of language-based cognition at different distances from unarticulated wisdom. Finding the "proper" message of a passage involves figuring out what layer of language-based cognition we are in. For it is clear that not all sentences of the *Ethics* are equally intended by Spinoza to be part of the line of the geometric order construed to make conceivable the inconceivable for those who are capable of looking at things *sub specie aeternitatis*. There are many particular individuals who are incapable of elevating their minds in this way. And for them, Spinoza mobilises an even larger apparatus than that of the propositions and demonstrations.

This aspect of the *Ethics* that we can call the aspect *sub specie vitae cottidianae* is what Curley's following description can be taken to hint at, even if he himself may have intended it otherwise:

10 This is to justify (within some limits) Leo Strauss's thesis, according to which the *Ethics* is written for eternity. See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 154 *et passim*. The line of the formal instruments borrowed from geometric order is written for eternity, but the other types of text obviously aim at Spinoza's contemporary readers. See below in the main text.

11 *Faust*, Part II: "(Mephistopheles) Kein Weg! In's Unbetretene, / Nicht zu Betretende; ein Weg an's Unerbetene / Nicht zu Erbittende. Bist du bereit? – / Nicht Schlösser sind, nicht Riegel wegzuschieben, / Von Einsamkeiten wirst umhergetrieben. / Hast du Begriff von Oed' und Einsamkeit?" In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, Band 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag 1970), 180.

12 This should not be confounded with the chronologically first tripartite version of the *Ethics*.

13 Nor messages concealed "between the lines" (Strauss, *Persecution*, 24ff).

On a first reading it is probably advisable to concentrate on the propositions, corollaries, scholia, prefaces, and appendices, leaving the demonstrations till later. This will make it easier to grasp the structure of the work, and give the reader some feeling for what is central and what is subsidiary. ‘Corollaries’ are often more important than the proposition they follow, and the scholia often offer more intuitive arguments for the propositions just demonstrated, or reply to what Spinoza regards as natural and important objections. The longer scholia, prefaces, and appendices tend to punctuate major divisions within the work and to sum up key contentions. (C I 404)

The propositions taken together with their demonstrations—and the definitions, axioms, and postulates—constitute the first layer of the text, the “*Ethics* for eternity.” The propositions, taken together with the corollaries, scholia, prefaces, and appendices, compose the second main layer, the “*Ethics* for everyday people” that has several sub-layers within it, corresponding to the grades of distance from the view of eternity and to the capacities of particular minds to grasp “eternal truths.” Spinoza intended to talk in various registers to various people, as his answer to Blijenbergh’s first letter and the Preface to TTP attest in a self-reflective way.

The differences of the manners of speech corresponding to these distances and capacities can be compared to the distinction between the analytic and synthetic method in Descartes.¹⁴ Descartes composed the *Meditations* according to the analytic way of demonstration, whereas in the *Principles* he at least intended to proceed synthetically. One can maintain that Spinoza combined the two methods: coupling the “synthetic” argumentation of the propositions and demonstrations with the series of other types of texts, he in turn attempted to integrate the “analytic” part into the “synthetic.”¹⁵

To make my proposal more graspable, we can adopt the famous distinction of the TTP between Euclidean-style¹⁶ and Biblical-style books.¹⁷ Given the obvious fact that not all of the *Ethics* is written in the Euclidean-style, we must uphold the thesis that its major part allows, and even needs to be investigated by way of, the hermeneutical method Spinoza developed for the Bible and all the books not following the Euclidean method.¹⁸ Undoubtedly, the demonstrations in geometrical order

14 See the closing passages of Descartes’s reply to the second series of objections to the *Meditations*, AT VII, 155ff; René Descartes, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*, eds. and trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 110–113.

15 This can also become part of an answer to the time-honoured query of why Spinoza did not write a preface to the *Ethics*.

16 “Euclid wrote only about things quite simple and most intelligible. Anyone can easily explain his work in any language. To grasp his intention and be certain of his true meaning we don’t need a complete knowledge of the language he wrote in, but only a quite ordinary [...] knowledge. Nor do we need to know about his life, concerns and customs, or in what language, to whom and when he wrote, or the fate of his book, or its various readings, or how and by whose deliberation it was accepted. What I’ve said here about Euclid must be said about everyone who has written about things by their nature perceptible.” TTP 7.67/G III 111/C II 185.

17 As for the interpretation of the Bible, Spinoza maintains that it “agrees completely” with “the method of interpreting nature” that “consists above all in putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things. In the same way, to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture and to infer from it the mind of Scripture’s authors, by legitimate inferences, as from certain data and principles.” TTP 7.8/G III 98/C II 171.

18 As the well-established practice of thorough philological interpretation of even the *Ethics* attests, that consists in precisely what Spinoza believes appropriate for the interpretation of the Bible (instead of “sacred” we must read

are the closest to eternal truths and unarticulated unitary wisdom, and so they are to be taken to constitute Euclidean-style ethics within the *Ethics*, one that does not need philological-hermeneutical investigations to be understood. In contrast, the prefaces, corollaries, scholia, and appendices represent Spinoza's commitment to supporting, with comments and elucidations of the truths put forward in geometric order, those who are less speculative-minded than the philosopher. No doubt, the comments contain sentences Spinoza considered to be true. Yet they cannot claim the same adequacy and authority as the propositions and demonstrations of Euclidean-style ethics. They even have different grades of adequacy, closely related to the way in which Spinoza distinguishes grades of adequacy when he talks about the advantages of intellectual knowledge as opposed to rational cognition, or when he prefers certain affects of joy—hope, for instance—to the opposite affects of sadness—fear, for instance—for andragogic reasons.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to mention an example of how to apply the proposed hermeneutical method of determining the proper layer of a passage before interpreting it (perhaps) precipitously.

In E3p2s, Spinoza famously and vehemently supports those who believe bodies can act for themselves and even against their souls or minds. A short passage from this scholium suffices to exemplify this view:

And of course, no one has yet determined what the Body can do, i.e., experience has not yet taught anyone what the Body can do from the laws of nature alone, insofar as nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the Mind. For no one has yet come to know the structure of the Body so accurately that he could explain all its functions—not to mention that many things are observed in the lower Animals that far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many things in their sleep that they would not dare to awake. This shows well enough that the Body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its Mind wonders at (E3p2s/G II 142/C I 495).

This quotation can almost be seen as prefiguring Nietzsche's invective in Zarathustra's speech against "the Despisers of the Body."¹⁹

However, Spinoza can in no way be identified with Nietzsche, and he certainly would not have written sentences such as

But the awakened, the knowing one says: body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is just a word for something on the body.²⁰

"canonical"): "this history must describe fully, with respect to all the books [...], the circumstances of which a record has been preserved, viz. the life, character, and concerns of the author of each book, who he was, on what occasion he wrote, at what time, for whom and finally, in what language. Next, it must relate the fate of each book: how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many different readings of it there were, by whose deliberation it was accepted among the sacred books." TTP 7.23/G III 101/C II 175.

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chapter 4, the title of which reads "On the Despisers of the Body".

20 Ibid., 23.

One of Spinoza's main teachings is the identity of body and soul, or mind: both are expressions, modes of one and the same substance conceived under different attributes. According to the complementary theses in E2p7 (G II 89–90/C I 451–452) and E5p1 (G II 281/C I 597, together with its demonstration):

P7: The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.

P1: In just the same way as thoughts and ideas of things are ordered and connected in the Mind, so the affections of the body, or images of things are ordered and connected in the body.

Dem.: The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things (by IIP7), and vice versa, the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas (by IIP6C and P7). So just as the order and connection of ideas happens in the Mind according to the order and connection of affections of the Body (by IIP1 8), so vice versa (by IIIP2), the order and connection of affections of the Body happens as thoughts and ideas of things are ordered and connected in the Mind, q.e.d.

Spinoza's standpoint is evident from propositions and demonstrations that are part of the *Ethics* for eternity, written in the strict geometric order. Therefore, a scholium that seems to contradict his demonstrated teaching can only be regarded as a text intended to support those who are rendered uncertain concerning this very teaching because of the influence of "idealists" overemphasising the relevance of the soul or mind against the body; Curley refers to Wolfson suggesting the §§ 7–17 of Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* as a possible target (see C I 495). So when Spinoza overemphasises the relevance of the body against the soul or mind, this must be considered as an "andragogic" stratagem, as it were, used to rectify the crooked stick, to counterbalance a false view by leaning to the opposite view (which is equally false if taken in itself, one-sidedly).

I do not maintain that this device of distinguishing the *Ethics sub specie aeternitatis* from the *Ethics sub specie vitae cottidianae* will or would revolutionise future Spinoza scholarship. In fact, I do not think at all that Spinoza scholarship needs to be revolutionised. What it does need is a gradual evolution resulting from the interdependence of historically and systematically-oriented types of doing philosophy mutually fertilising each other. As far as the main doctrine is concerned, Spinoza's philosophy can be understood, and the influential interpretations of even the past generations of Spinoza scholars will not cease to serve as so many inevitable points of orientation for any future generation. The device I propose to adopt can be useful when we strive to support one interpretation over alternative ones, or when facing a trend that relies on a false interpretation on the basis of a fashionable contemporary perspective. As in the above example, I believe we can rectify it by pointing out the subordinated systematic place of the passage that seems to corroborate the unacceptable interpretation.

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Memoirs of an Aspiring Spinozist

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Keywords: feminism, critical materialism, Indigenous philosophy, Continental French philosophy, Gilles Deleuze, neo-materialism, affirmative ethical passions.

Rules of Engagement

One engages with Spinoza's thought at one's risk and peril. This is not a philosopher one encounters flippantly or discards lightly—reading his texts requires *gravitas*, but also a touch of recklessness. Special attention to the mode of approach to his *corpus* is called for, or else one might disappear within the gravitational pull of Spinoza's massive conceptual apparatus. Nothing would be less worthy of Spinoza than to become a Spinozist without knowing why, and yet it happens all the time. Accounting for how one does it, how one gets “into” Spinoza in the first place, sets the first meta-methodological requirement for his readers. And it is such a complex phenomenon, so slow and speedy at the same time, that often one does not even get beyond it. One just keeps on trying to begin with Spinoza, and his texts are like a receding horizon. One aspires to become a Spinozist, over and over again. Those repeated attempts at making sense of an affect, a yearning, that is neither fully actualised, nor remotely virtual, end up shaping what I would call a life *in* and *with* philosophy. A life concerning the affirmation of the positivity of the desire to adequately understand the conditions that shape our ignorance, our half-truths, let alone the fake news we are surrounded by. “We” has entered the conversation by now, because one can only produce adequate knowledge relationally and collectively. *One* is always *we*.

To discuss Spinoza, we need to plunge into a relational web of materially-grounded variables and encounters. All of them are bound to the specificity of one's location, speed, and intensity, but none is individual as such. These variables are rather relational, transversal, and collective—they connect each of us to a nonlinear web of heterogeneous others. Deleuze is so right: it is always a

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case of “us in the middle of Spinoza.”¹ Becoming-Spinozist, as if in passing, yet meaning it very much.

My approach to Spinoza has always been that of a cartographer. I positioned myself according to the following coordinates: trained in the history of philosophy, with feminist lenses, mostly thanks to Genevieve Lloyd; raised in the context of the Australian philosophical tradition of critical materialism, which is open to Indigenous philosophical insights; working in Continental French philosophy, mostly on and with Gilles Deleuze; co-developing feminist neo-materialism, alongside many in my generation; deeply committed to democracy, social justice and solidarity as affirmative ethical passions.

Ultimately, the starting point is also the destination: to position philosophical thinking in and for love of the world. Just that, all of that.

Conceptual Hubs

My critical Spinozism is built around two sprawling conceptual hubs. The first is vital materialism and the rejection of the dualistic divides: mind/body, nature/culture and humans/non-humans. Also known as methodological naturalism, this concept is central to the Continental philosophical tradition of immanence. The second hub is the positivity of desire, that is to say, the ontological function of desire as the constitutive capacity to persist and endure in one’s existence in relation with others. That is the anti-Hegelian aspect, which I also take as the prompt for a critique of psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious.

These relatively simple insights generate unimaginable degrees of complexity, in the shape of a multitude of corollaries, rhizomatic growths, far-fetched and fast-moving consequences and unpredictable effects that unfold freely. These lines expand in non-linear, nomadic, tentacular ways from the main conceptual hubs, as variations on a continuum, that is, the non-deterministic vision of living and self-organizing matter. I could not possibly cover them all here, but I can design some of their patterns of becoming, that is to say, their spinning effects and resonances.

1 The Vital Materialist Hub

1.1 Spinozist materialist philosophy produces a careful renaturalization of subjectivity that challenges the reductive aspects of social constructivism. That shift proved inspirational for feminist materialism and posthuman feminism. Nature is a natural-cultural continuum, yet fully immersed in history and social structures and vice-versa, without dualistic oppositions. What shoots out from this is an environmentally integrated form of trans-individuality of all entities, human beings included. This stresses the common nature of humans and nonhumans, thereby rejecting the transcendental power of consciousness as the distinctive human trait. Immanence rules.

1 Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 122.

1.2 This shift is also helpful in decentering human exceptionalism and undoing anthropocentrism. A new materialist approach displaces the boundary between *bios*, the kind of life that has traditionally been reserved for *Anthropos*, and *zoe*, the wider range of non-human life, in its generative vitality. This allowed me to expand the materialist relational ontology to cover not only organic non-human life—*zoe*—, but the geological foundations of living matter—*geo*—and technological mediation, producing a notion of subjects as “zoe-geo-techno- based.”

1.3 It is simply extraordinary that, for Spinoza, the vitality of matter extends to manufactured and artificial entities. It can therefore be replicated by the technological apparatus, which today is capable of going “live,” producing “smart” things and self-correcting Artificial Intelligence networks, objects, and relations. This enlarged and dynamic—or vital—vision of materialism extends beyond the reductively natural, while it also avoids holistic organicism. It provides a media ontology *avant la lettre*.

1.4 Thinking becomes an extra-textual practice—a philosophy of the outside. Adequate understanding is rational, in the sense of being rigorously argued, and not ideological—superstitious, fanatical or delusional. But it is not a case of transcendental reason at work as much as immanent, situated, zoe-geo-techno-mediated thinking at play. Thinking and living-with others, including human, non-human and technological others, requires a collaborative and relational praxis. It aims at reaching an adequate understanding of the material conditions that structure our subjectivity and connect us to others, including non-humans.

1.5 Spinoza’s radical democratic politics is practically irresistible. His communitarianism has inspired critiques of despotism, authoritarianism and fascist politics, electing democracy as the only system capable of supporting our collective quest for adequate knowledge of our living conditions. An epistemological effort that is supported by affirmative ethics.

Spinozist politics stands at a critical distance from the liberal philosophies of social contract theory, such as Locke and Hobbes, and supports a more radical idea of democracy from below.

1.6 Spinoza’s grounded perspectivism sustains a critical engagement with Indigenous and Aboriginal epistemologies. Ancient forms of Indigenous vital materialism can intersect and dialogue with Western philosophical attempts to rethink the unity of matter without deterministic hierarchies. Indigenous approaches moreover foreground the critique of settler colonialism and its violent management of less-than-human and non-human others. They criticize specifically Western dualism and the instrumental use that European thought since the Enlightenment made of dualistic oppositions. Instead of human/non-human, nature/culture distinctions, they tend to posit instead a “perspectivism” that rests on a continuum across all species. In other words, they all partake of the same living principle or soul, as each living entity is differential and relational, grounded on the Earth as the basic element. The Earth as the element that contains all others, for instance in the Aboriginal tradition, allows us to think of “country” as a method as well as a ruling concept. Country is a multi-dimensional idea that includes humans, rocks, animals, and clouds, embedding human subjects into their environment. It is a moral value that imposes a duty of planetary care, as well as an epistemological notion. Environmental theory and policy could learn from this.

2 Positivity of Desire Hub

2.1 Desire as *conatus* is overflowing abundance: one gives what one did not even suspect one had. Desire is not lack but plenitude, not negative dialectics but generative excess. Spinoza injects heavy doses of generosity into the discussion of desire, uncoupling it from narcissism and paranoia—the pillars of Western individualism. By reconnecting desire to its ontological roots as the inexhaustible capacity to persist and endure in one's existence against all odds, a Spinozist approach also instills the critique of possessive individualism. Capitalism is a code and system that prioritizes the acquisition of commodities as the answer to the ultimate question of what we desire. Debunking this egotistic and negative mode of relation through an ethics of affirmation consequently supports a radical democratic politics.

2.2 Spinozist joy and affirmation are the flow of living energy that feeds upon and nurtures in return multiscale degrees of engagement with entities of all kinds and species. It is a relational system geared to the production of different degrees of relational challenges and pleasures. It expresses the constitutive sense of well-being that “we”—living entities—derive from the sheer fact of staying alive together. But although “we” are in this predicament together, “we” are not One and the Same. There is no flat ontology at work in Spinoza: his system is both materialist and differential. Affirmation as an ethical affect is directly proportional to our respective abilities to activate and increase our relational ability, as the fundamental shared value. This approach includes also encounters with and processes of transformation of pain and loss. Affirmation is not the denial of pain, just a different way of processing it, through a collective praxis of co-construction of sustainable and generative alternatives.

2.3 Relational ontology within a differential vision of materialism means that in the beginning, there is a relation to other entities, in so far as we are all endowed with embodied minds and embrained bodies. This supported my efforts to think beyond the dialectics of devalorized—sexualized, racialized, and naturalized—differences. It grounded the political in the affirmative ethics of the collective construction of alternative feminist, anti-racist, and ecological subject positions beyond western humanism and anthropocentrism.

2.4 The emphasis on desire as freedom from lack and possession, that is to say, as a positive, non-reactive activity driven by the relation ethics of affirmation, is the major source of inspiration. Affirmation is the force that endures and sustains, whereas sad passions bring about impotence and disaggregation of forces. Affirmative ethics is the affect that binds together the heterogeneous components of complex subject assemblages: we are all capable of affecting and being affected.

Affirmative ethics is the effort at achieving mutually empowering relationships based on collaboration and the combination of the specific powers of each entity. Again, it is an aspiration that guides our attempts at pursuing generative relations. The aim is to increase the capacity to preserve oneself against adverse forces. Entities and individuals grow thanks to a collaborative community. What binds us together, beyond transactional and contractual interests, is the common propensity to persevere in our existence and increase our relational capacities. An ethics of affirmative collaboration is our common factor.

2.5 Spinoza's thoughts on death have captivated me. The point about life, as an immanent non-human force—*zoe*—is its monstrous energy, which transforms entities and transposes timelines, destroying much in passing. An essential part of life processes consists in collapsing and breaking down. Because so many of these processes involve non-human agents and entities, both life & death are impersonal, or rather a-personal or incorporeal forces. To depersonalize death means to labour to transcend its negative connotations, thereby liberating new modes of understanding, delinked from the bound self.

The distinction between personal and impersonal death is crucial for Spinoza. The former is linked to the suppression of the individualized ego, the latter is beyond the ego: a death that is always beneath, before and beyond the self. It pushes to the furthest boundary the notion of resilience and endurance, stressing each entity's ability to become other or something else. Death is caught in the cycle of never-ending metamorphoses as the transversal force that flows across space and time. It does not mark the end of time, as much as its recurrence, the repetition of our unceasing power to become. This is the force of affirmation of the interconnection with an "outside" that is *zoe*-geo-techno-mediated, planetary, and cosmic, and thus infinite.

2.6 Eternity can only be experienced within time. Personal death means one ceases to be part of that vital flow of positive and negative interactions with others, which is life itself. But something in one's existence does go on after death, though it is delinked from the continued existence of the actual self. The mind's eternity rests on its ability to understand itself as part of a larger reflexive totality. Given that the existence of the mind, however, is parallel to that of the body, the mind does cease to exist with the death of the body. But that does not mean that the idea of the embodied and embedded entity gets wiped out with the disappearance of the body. Nothing can ever change what one has been, so the truth of what has been the case cannot be lost. The force or intensity of one's existence remains steadfast: in so far as the subject is able to understand itself as part of a continuum nature, it perceives itself as eternal, that is to say, both vulnerable and indestructible.

Death may be the radical disruption of personal consciousness through the destruction of the individual body and the embodied portion of *conatus* which that body actualizes. But consciousness is not only personal. All material entities can understand themselves as partaking of a larger totality, which is by definition eternal in its recurrence. Wisdom lies in the contemplation of the eternity of life forces, which can only take place in and within time. Eternity is not the same thing as immortality or "lasting forever," but rather the opposite: dying into the affective traces of our presence in the world.

Being dead does not reduce one to the status of a figment of other people's imaginations, but instead it dissolves the self into an interconnected continuum with living matter as constant becoming. Whatever happens—and death always does happen—we will have been and nothing can change that, not even death itself. The future perfect paves the road to the continuous present of affective relations: it will have been just *a* life, one which I can aspire truly to call 'my own' only after I have lost it to others.

Living a philosophical life with Spinoza implies the acceptance of mutual dependence on others, but also resolute detachment from the half-truths we seem prone to produce together, especially at times of unrest and political turmoil. The deep aspiration to achieve freedom through adequate understanding of the conditions of our bondage, however, is what endures as a bond between us.

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The Social: a Condition and a Danger to Politics

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Keywords: multitudo, societas, civitas, privatus, communis

1 *Multitudo, societas, and civitas*

The distinction between the idea of the *multitudo* regarded as a composition of concordant and discordant forces (the *societas*) and the idea of it as a unified institution of powers (the *civitas*) paves the way to a line of inquiry into the relations between society and politics in Spinoza, an inquiry which focuses on the recognition that the social has a double face: it is both a condition for and a danger to politics. To see that natural right is not only the measure and guardian of the *civitas*, but also a danger to it, we must consider an individual who is obscured when the *multitudo* is regarded only from the perspective of *communis*: viz., this individual Spinoza calls the *privatus* (TP 4.6).

Spinoza demonstrates the ontological foundation of sociability in *Ethics* IV. There he examines what follows given that human beings are parts of Nature, living in the company of other parts with which they share the properties of being finite and being such that their individual powers can always be surpassed. This idea is expressed in E4a: “there is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed.”

In E4p30, Spinoza distinguishes between the *conveniens* and the *contrarium*: things of the same nature are concordant (*convenientia*) when one of them increases our power to act and discordant (*discrepantia*) when one of them restrains our power to act. A thing of the same nature as ours, therefore, is bad for us not because of what it has in common with our nature, but because of what it has that is contrary to our power. Whereas difference is established *between essences*, contrariety is established *between powers*. *Convenientia* is the ground for commonality, which favours the conservation of singular things whose natures agree with one another and that need each other to conserve themselves. Although the common does not prevent something from being bad and contrary to us, insofar as something agrees with our nature it is necessarily good. From this follows the identity between the good and the useful, since “nothing, therefore, can be good except insofar as it agrees with our nature. So the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful it is, and conversely”

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(E4p31d). Via *convenientia*, individual powers augment and reciprocally strengthen each other; via *discrepantia*, the powers repel each other and are weakened.

To this distinction laid out in E4p30 is added another, in E4p29, between the *diversum*—a singular thing entirely different from our nature and with which no relationship can be established—and the *communis*—a necessary relationship between singular things of the same nature. “Our power to act, however it is conceived, can be determined, and hence aided or restrained, by the power of another singular thing which has something in common with us” (E4p29d). It follows that a singular thing whose nature is entirely different from ours neither increases nor decreases our power to act and is thus neither good nor bad for us, but it will be so if its nature has something in common with ours. *Diversum* is the absence of relation, and *communis* is the necessary cause of relations between singular things of the same nature. Passion is at the heart of the discordance between affects, both in a singular human being and among human beings, and for this reason “insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to be concordant in nature” (E4p32). Therefore, the community is not identical to *convenientia*. For this reason, in discordance, there is an absence of *convenientia* but no loss of *communis*; because the passionate relations of opposition are discordances between beings who have something in common, there might be a break of the *convenientia* without a dissolution of the community.

Since things that completely share the same nature and are necessarily concordant with each other are the most useful to each other, it comes to light that the most useful thing for each human being is another human being, even if, under the sway of passions, they are troublesome to each other. Reason *demonstrates* and experience *shows* the benefits of life in common and the harms of loneliness. This line of thought leads, according to Spinoza, to the traditional definition of man as a social animal.

In the political treatises, the relations of *convenientia* and *discrepantia* (or of concordance and discordance) refer to the concept of *multitudo*, which is conceived differently in each of the treatises. In the TTP, the *multitudo* (typically preceded by the adjective *saeva*, meaning ‘ferocious’ or ‘furious’, e.g. TTP 18.6/G III 225) is described as fickle, permeated by contrary affects, always oriented *ex suo ingenio*; to keep it within the boundaries required for the stability and conservation of the *imperium*, prudent and vigilant men are needed who make the laws conform with the *ingenium gentis*. In the TP, despite its changeable *ingenium* and its contrary passions, the *multitudo* is conceived as a political subject and its natural right becomes the definition of civil law. The difference between the two treatises stems from the conceptual elements established in the *Ethics*, such as the physics of *cohaerentia*, *constantia*, and *convenientia* between bodies, the definition of the human mind as the idea of its body, the articulation between physics and psychology with the theory of common notions, the definition of the singular essence as *conatus*, the sociability emerging from the affects, and the distinction between *sui juris* and *alterius juris*.

According to the TTP, reason and experience teach us no surer means to live in peace and security than by forming a *societas* with fixed laws, occupying a certain region of the world, working together, exchanging the products of labour, and concentrating the strength of all “as it were (*quasi*), into one body, the body of the social order” (TTP 3.5/G III 47/C II 114).¹ Because it is a set of individual bodies, variability is intrinsic to the *multitudo*, which can only be stabilised by becoming,

1 G III 47: “*omnium vires ad unum quasi corpus, nempe societatis, redigere.*”

as it were (*quasi*), a single body: society. That is why Spinoza introduces the notion of *fides* (reciprocal trust) from which the pact arises, which in turn is not the traditional foundational moment of politics, but rather the image that the *multitudo* requires in order to give meaning to its unity as a social and political body. In the TP, the right of the *imperium* is the collective natural right determined not by the power of each individual, but by the power of the *multitudo* insofar as it “le[ads] as if by one mind (*una veluti mente*)”, because “just as each person in the natural state has as much right as he has power, so also the body and mind of the whole state [*imperii*] have as much right as they have power” (TP 3.2/G III 284–285/C II 517). The collective acquires then a new shape, in which the *multitudo*, insofar as it is *una veluti mente* and not just *quasi unum corpus*, does not require the imagery of the pact to devise its own unity.

Although both treatises highlight the fundamental role of the passions and of the ceaseless changeability of circumstances, the arguments they develop are different. The TTP emphasises the rational dimension of the foundational political moment, even though the sovereign power must still employ political art and strategies to take advantage of the citizens’ imagination and passions in order to conserve itself. This is perfectly understandable, as it concerns the *body* of society and the *body* of sovereignty, which, like every other body, are subject to varying circumstances and the whims of fortune, thereby continuously putting at risk the social and political institutions. In contrast, the TP emphasises the passionate dimension inherent in the very political foundation, which stems from the natural condition of humans. However, in the TP, Spinoza also emphasises the rationality of institutions as the only means to preserve sovereign political power.

Thus, in the TTP, the rational character of the political foundation does not prevent, but rather asks for, a political art: the quality of institutions and laws depends on political leaders’ prudence and vigilance vis-à-vis the passions of citizens. In the TP, despite the passionate nature of politics, the rational quality of institutions and laws is what determines political leaders’ prudence and vigilance. This change in the line of reasoning occurring between the two treatises mirrors the passage from the reference to the *single body* of the *multitudo* in the TTP to the unity of the *single mind* of the *multitudo* in the TP.

Let us now point out the similarities between the two treatises regarding the *multitudo* as a social and political subject.

In the correspondence and in the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza uses the word *multitudo* in the arithmetic sense of numerical multiplicity or of extrinsic plurality (as opposed to extrinsic unity). In the political treatises, however, he describes a *practice* by which an extrinsic multiplicity manages to become an intrinsic unity, that is, the passage of individuals to the *multitudo*, and from the *multitudo* to *societas* and the *civitas*. The passage from numerical multiplicity to socio-political unity takes place on two levels, which can be simultaneous or consecutive, depending on the circumstances.

The first level is that of the material institution of society: i.e., when a group of individuals agrees to jointly occupy a territory, establishes cooperative relationships in the division of labour and in the distribution of products, forges a common language, and creates the means to protect itself against the dangers that threaten them from the outside (TTP 3). It also comes about with agreements and the union of the forces of individuals, who acquire more rights over nature when united than when isolated (TP 2.13 and 15), and in such a way that there can be no right of nature specific to human beings except “where men have common rights and are jointly able to claim for themselves

lands they can inhabit and cultivate, are able to protect themselves, fend off any force, and live according to the common opinion of all” (TP 2.15/G III 281/C II 512–513).

The second level is that of the institution of politics, or the passage from the common natural right of the (materially or economically formed) *societas* to civil law or sovereign power, i.e., a passage from individual and group power to the unique power of the *multitudo* as the subject of sovereign power. The *civitas* is instituted with the purpose of protecting the *societas*, that is (as we read in the two treatises), of imposing limits on the natural right of each individual by means of the natural right of the *multitudo* constituted by the unity of citizens under the law.

In both treatises, society is a unified *composition* of individuals, and politics is a unitary *constitution* of citizens; the passage from composition to constitution is the *institution of politics*.

Together, the TTP and TP teach us that the institution of society is the gathering or concentration of individual *forces* to form “one body, as it were,” whereas the institution of politics is the union of individual *powers* to constitute the power of the *multitudo* “guided, as it were, by one mind.” Politics, *the guidance by one mind*, is the idea of society, *one body*. However, the use of *quasi unum corpus* in the TTP and of *una veluti mens* in the TP indicates that, although social and political life must be deduced from the natural condition of humans, it is not immediately given but is rather *instituted* by human action when the extrinsic or numerical multiplicity of composition gives way to the intrinsic plurality of the constitution of an entirely new body and new mind. Regarded as “one body, as it were,” society is the materiality of the concentration and gathering of individual *forces*. Considered as “guided, as it were, by one mind,” politics is the union of individual *powers* under the rule of law or of civil law understood as a collective natural right.

As a body, society can be defined by the *ingenium multitudinis*, by the simultaneity of the effort of self-perseverance in existence and by the variation and change typical of social relations (due to their submission to circumstances and to the ceaseless interchange between conflicting or concordant passional individual forces). If, in the TTP, Spinoza underlines the importance of prudent and vigilant men to keep the institutional order, and if, in the TP, he claims that politics must be an art so as to preserve the harmony and fidelity of the citizens, it is because he conceives of the *multitudo* not only as the origin of the social and the political realms, but also as internally torn apart by opposing affects that can endanger the two institutions of which it is the efficient cause, namely, the *societas* and the *civitas*.

In other words, the presence of the *multitudo* as a subject is not the presence of reason in the public space, but that of the passions, which determine both the private space and social life: “So people who persuade themselves that a multitude, which may be divided over public affairs, can be induced to live only according to the prescription of reason, those people are dreaming of the golden age of the Poets. They’re captive to a myth” (TP 1.5/G III 275/C II 506).

2 *Potentia, ingenium, and aptitudo*

According to the *Ethics*, a *res singularis* is one whose components operate together and simultaneously as a single efficient cause to produce an action or an effect; an *essentia singularis* is a power to exist and act that operates in view of its self-preservation and defines itself as *conatus*. The causal unity (which defines the singular thing) and the power to exist and act (which defines the singular essence)

imply that, from *res* to *essentia*, a transition occurs from a singularity's *components* to its *constituents*, that is, to its nature (for a *natura* is a determinate way of acting). According to the *Ethics*, an individual is an integration, connection, and internal differentiation of the parts that constitute it and that can be distinguished as either weak or strong according to their bodily affections or to their relationship with external causes. Weak parts are those affected, which are subject to the power of external causes; strong parts are those capable not only of resisting the power of external causes, but also of overcoming it or affecting it in such a way as to make it agree with their own power and assimilate it, thereby becoming even stronger. The same individual can be weak in certain affections and strong in others, and the power of its *conatus* will depend on its ability to push away or minimise its weak parts and increase its strong ones. Conflict and agreement are not reduced to external relations; they also occur internally among the individual's constituent parts. The dynamics of bodily affections and the logic of the affects are, therefore, open to agreement and conflict between the individual and others and within the individual himself. Every *res singularis* and every *essentia singularis* is a field of forces or intensities that are internally concordant and contrary, and engaged in relations with fields of forces that agree or conflict with them.

Regarded as “one body, as it were” and “guided, as it were, by one mind,” the *multitudo* must be conceived of as an individual or a complex singularity whose components form a single efficient cause (like all singular things) and constitute a single power (like all singular essences). But, at the same time, like all individuals, the *multitudo* must be conceived as a field of forces with different intensities within its power, that is, according to the differences in the forces that constitute it and, therefore, prone to both agreement and conflict between its parts or between its forces. As necessary effects of the action of the *multitudo*, agreement and conflict relate thus to *societas* and *civitas*, as well as to the relations between them.

In this way, we understand the meaning of the three theses that ground Spinoza's political thought and determine the decisive presence of the social both in the institution of politics and in the risk of its disappearance:

1. The institution of politics seeks to establish a balance between three powers: the power of individuals, the power of the *multitudo*, and the power of the sovereign. This balance is achieved by means of a geometric proportionality (*ratio*) among the three powers at the time of political foundation, when the decision concerning who will have the right to exercise government or direct public affairs is made.
2. Since the natural right of individuals is kept in the *multitudo* as a collective natural right which is the civil law, it follows that the main enemy of the body politic is not external but internal to it, and can be found in a private individual (*privatus*) or in a group of private individuals wishing to seize civil law to serve their own interests.
3. The balance among the three powers is ceaselessly disrupted as a result of the dynamics of social forces. This is the key to understanding the duration of a body politic, that is, the causes and means for its conservation as well as its change or disappearance. The history of a body politic is determined by what occurs in the realm of social relations regarded as a field of forces—sometimes in agreement, sometimes in conflict—that determine political relations.

These three theses ground two universal principles of the political *ratio*, or of the (geometric) proportional relation among the three powers:

1. Sovereign power must be inversely proportional to the power of individuals considered in isolation or as a whole: that is, the power of collective natural right or civil law is incommensurate with the power of the citizens' natural right considered in isolation or as a whole.
2. Conversely, the power of the rulers must be inversely proportional to the citizens' collective power, as the latter must be greater than that of the rulers: that is, the power of the rulers is not identical to the *imperium*, since this always belongs to the *multitudo* regarded as a political body and mind.

These two principles show that sovereignty cannot be dispersed, as it belongs to the *multitudo* as a whole (*integra multitudo*). Thus, political regimes can be distinguished neither by the source of sovereign power (since the source is always the *multitudo*), nor by the number of rulers (since sovereignty is not synonymous with the rulers). Therefore, what can be dispersed is the right to exercise government; that which distinguishes political regimes is the determination of who holds this right. This means that *potestas* (ruling power) can be dispersed, whereas *potentia* (sovereignty) is indivisible. That is why, when proposing the most suitable institutions for each political regime, Spinoza turns to society and proposes institutions that may compensate the part of society that is excluded from the government. In monarchies, this is realized by the great councils and the general assembly of the people, which prevent the king from being alone and governing arbitrarily; it also works by creating the institution of the armed people or the popular militia, which ensures to those excluded from government what is traditionally regarded as the privilege of the nobility, namely, the force of arms. In aristocracies, it is necessary to have institutions that allow the plebs, in their capacity as public servants, to participate in acts of administration, while also appearing on the public scene as a threat to the power of the patricians. The only political regime in which the *potentia* of the *multitudo* and the *potestas* of government are identical is democracy, thus called *omnino absolutum imperium* because in it sovereignty and the right to exercise government belong to the *integra multitudo*, which remains *sui juris* and an efficient immanent cause of the political regime, thereby materialising Spinoza's assertion of *jus sive potentia*.

The social is a condition of and a danger to the political realm as long as we understand that the natural right of individuals is not just the measure and guardian of civil law, but also its greatest threat. It is the measure: natural right determines the *ratio* between the power of social subjects and that of sovereignty. It is the guardian: natural right prevents rulers from identifying themselves with sovereignty, since natural right is what preserves the power of political subjects or citizens as a collective natural right (civil law). It is a threat: by natural right, all men wish to rule rather than be ruled, so no one renounces the desire to identify themselves with the sovereign power. Consequently, natural right turns citizens not only into protectors of the law, but also into possible enemies of the *imperium* and threats to the power of the *multitudo*. Thus, when Spinoza uses the word *privatus* in TP 4.6, he declares that no individual or private group *qua* private has the right to either claim the status of defender of public law or to violate it in the name of the common good: whoever does so is a usurper, or an enemy of the *imperium*.

Hence, Spinoza is the first political thinker who, while taking the social as a reference, develops the idea that the private seizure of public power introduces domination and tyranny. The novelty of Spinoza's position lies, firstly, in not attributing domination to the arbitrary will of someone or some

few (the classic definition of tyranny). Secondly, it lies in the fact that the possibility of domination is inscribed in the natural individual right itself. The cause of domination is thus not to be found in some accidental vice of some citizens; the cause of domination is not moral but natural, since social subjects are naturally ambitious, haughty, proud, and envious. Therefore, political practice consists in determining the means by which the natural desire for domination that runs socially through the *civitas* might be contained or, in extreme cases, blocked. Those resources are to be found in the quality of public institutions rather than in the moral virtues of government officials.

In light of the triple meaning of natural right and of the distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, we can add a fourth thesis to the three theses that ground Spinoza's political thought. This thesis is introduced in the TTP when Spinoza discusses the wisdom and the prudence of political founders who are attentive to the *ingenium multitudinis*, and in the TP when he asserts that the *imperium* presupposes not only the agent's *potentia* (the *multitudo* as a political subject) but also the patient's *aptitudo* (the *multitudo* as a social subject). Thus, for example, war gives rise to a society terrified in the face of the fear of death, and which cannot be expected to have an aptitude for democracy; such a society is instead likely to imagine that it can save itself from fear by giving power to (i.e., electing as king) whoever has weapons, without realising that, in getting rid of a momentary evil, it has instituted lasting evils for the future. The distinction between power (*potentia*) and aptitude (*aptitudo*) indicates that this fourth thesis has an ontological basis, namely, the thesis from the TP that by nature everyone wants to rule and not be ruled, and that consequently it is necessary to guide humans in such a way that they believe they are not guided but rather live according to their free discretion. For this, sovereignty and the ruler cannot be identical; their non-identity ensures there is an obstacle to the desire for the private appropriation of sovereign power and, therefore, to the natural desire for domination that unfolds in society.

Why does Spinoza consider it essential for the conservation of sovereign power to guide humans in such a way that they do not believe they are guided (that they are *alterius juris*), but rather that they live according to their free discretion (*sui juris*)? The answer lies in democracy.

In a row of thinkers ranging from the ancients to the moderns, Spinoza is the only advocate of democracy. In TTP 16, democracy is presented as "the most natural of political regimes," as it preserves socially and politically the status of equality that everyone enjoyed in the state of nature (G III 195, line 17). And, according to TP 11, in democracy, unlike in other regimes, there is no separation or distinction between the power (*potentia*) of the *multitudo* and the power (*potestas*) of government. Instead, there is an agreement of political power and social aptitude when fulfilling the natural desire to rule and not be ruled. In a democracy, everybody is a ruler, a citizen, and a subject (*subditus*); everyone obeys the laws that they themselves established, and political power is the immanent effect of their efficient cause. In other words, democratic politics presupposes and preserves a democratic society.

Spinoza can show by means of democracy, and with several historical examples, that the distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, on the one hand, and the divisibility of the *potestas* itself, that is, the exclusion of a part of the *multitudo* from the exercise of government, on the other hand, is the effect of social divisions produced by social inequalities. In this way, we understand that the indivisibility of sovereignty (or of the power/*potentia* of the *multitudo*) and the indivisibility of the power/*potestas* to govern, which characterise democracy as the regime that preserves natural equality, disappear under the effects of social inequality. In other political regimes, the indivisibility of

sovereignty (or the power of the *multitudo* as a political subject) does not prevent the divisibility of government power, and therefore does not prevent the unequal distribution of power and the political exclusion of a part of society.

The indivisibility of sovereignty, the divisibility of government power, political exclusion, social divisions, and the preservation of the natural right of individuals under civil law all work together as a necessary efficient cause of the conflicts between politics and society. The social source of these conflicts is the *multitudo* fractured by inequalities that determine the social emergence of the *privatus* which comes to express itself politically.

Civil law is the natural right of the *civitas*, that is, its *potentia* of permanence and its *potestas* of operation. Therefore, according to the TP, the *civitas* cannot be an enemy of itself since it would destroy itself. This means that the limits of its power are limitations that the *civitas* imposes on civil law: (1) to prevent it from being exercised arbitrarily; (2) to ensure the preservation of harmony, determining which conflicts it can withstand not only without loss of power, but also with an increase in power; and (3) to determine the obedience of citizens. The limits of *potestas* are first established negatively and then established positively.

Negatively, the *civitas* cannot legislate on what is not subject to the laws (e.g., thought and speech, as well as private affective relationships), as this legislation will be useless. It also cannot impose what is contrary to human nature and to individual natural right (e.g., parricide, matricide, fratricide, loving what you hate, hating what you love) because it will give rise to the fury and indignation of society, which will rebel against the *civitas* and destroy it. In short, the *potestas* must take into account the citizens' *ingenium* and *aptitudo* in order to instil them with respect and fear and to avoid being hated by society, which, in a rage, might conspire against the *civitas*, whose power diminishes the more it fears the social subjects (TP 3.9).

Positively, the *civitas* must be obeyed. Since the sovereign right was instituted by the *multitudo* at the time of the institution of the *imperium*, and since the right to establish laws belongs exclusively to the sovereign because the law is simply the *multitudo* guiding itself as if it were a single mind (TP 4.1), it follows that obedience is nothing but the *multitudo* obeying itself (or *sui juris*). Political obedience is the reiteration, in the collective imaginary, of the institution of the *civitas* and the *respublica* since, at the time of this institution, the *multitudo* qua society institutes the incommensurability between the power of the *imperium* and the individual powers of citizens (the first principle of proportionality), as well as the distinction between what concerns public affairs and what concerns only private affairs (the second principle of proportionality). Obedience is a second or derivative act, which expresses the virtue of the *civitas* because it is capable of preserving the citizens in a condition of *sui juris*.

The negative and positive limitations of the rulers' *potestas* are possible because they are consequences of their conformity to the *multitudo*'s *potentia*, *ingenium*, and *aptitudo*. These limitations make it possible to comprehend the difference between the consented obedience or the political freedom of the citizen in a condition of *sui juris* and the tyranny or servitude of the subject (*subditus*) in a condition of *alterius juris*. But these limitations also help to reveal the origin of conflicts and seditions:

For certainly we should impute rebellions, wars, and contempt for, or violation of, the laws not so much to the wickedness of the subjects as to the corruption of the state. Men

aren't born civil; they become civil. Moreover, the natural affects of men are the same everywhere. If wickedness is more prevalent in one Commonwealth than in another, and more sins are committed there, this surely comes from the fact that the [more wicked] Commonwealth hasn't provided adequately for harmony, hasn't set up its laws wisely enough, and so, hasn't obtained the absolute Right of a Commonwealth. (TP 5.2/G III 295/C II 529).

The source of conflicts and rebellions should not be sought in the *ingenium multitudinis*, but rather in the fact that the commonwealth itself does not function to ensure harmony insofar as it does not institute rights with prudence and is not capable of maintaining its own right qua absolute. Instead, the source of rebellions and wars must be sought in politics itself in its relation to society.

If the *civitas* enacts useless laws or laws that cause indignation and fury among citizens, who then deem it legitimate and necessary to rise up against them, or if political institutions are made in such a way as to generate privileges and exclusions, then it is the *civitas* itself that is the cause of seditions.

Rebellions, arising out of *indignatio*, express the political division of the *multitudo* as an effect of social divisions (unequal relations of forces or, as Spinoza maintains, unequal relations of the possession of weapons and wealth). In rebellions, social subjects relate to political power as if the latter were an external force that affects them, since the difference between the *summa potentia* of citizens and the *potestas* of rulers has been blurred due to the rulers' intentions of identifying themselves with sovereignty, which then becomes pure exteriority and repeals the *potentia* of political subjects.

If the *civitas* is powerless to prevent rebellions, if it appears as an external force that befalls citizens, it is because it is not truly established as a political reality; it has not carried out the transition from social unification to political unity, and there is not the recognition of its sovereignty qua power over the *multitudo* as a political subject. In rebellions, the identity between right and power (the *jus sive potentia*) was neither instituted nor recognised, that is, the *multitudo*'s right/power was not instituted as civil law and, therefore, the political body lacks its mind and allows itself to be dragged by an imaginary mind in which the *civitas* is reduced to violent sociability that institutions and laws are powerless to moderate, since this violence was engendered by the laws themselves.

We thus understand why Spinoza shows that the weakness of politics manifests itself in political forms grounded not only in the exclusion of a part of society from public decisions, but mostly in the emergence of a distance between the *image* of the political regime and its *actual form*: tyranny appears as if it were a monarchy and oligarchy as if it were an aristocracy. This is what allows the usurpation of the political form by the social power of a private individual or of private groups. On the contrary, under the guise of a subversion of the *civitas*, a rebellion shows in reality that the divided society recognises the absence of a true institution of politics and intends to make it a reality.

Translated from the Portuguese by Andre Santos Campos

A Few Words about Spinoza, a Philosopher of Few or, Perhaps, No Words

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Keywords: idealism, non-Western thinkers, the principle of sufficient reason, rationalism, skepticism

I've been invited, in a forward-looking way, to say what are some of the most exciting new directions for research in Spinoza. Before you get your hopes up (or down), I want to inform you at the outset that I'm not going to answer that question. Part of the reason I'm not going to answer is that I want to take a moment to highlight and appreciate the vibrant state of Spinoza scholarship now and over the last 20 years or so. As many of you know, research on Spinoza now includes not only Spinoza's metaphysics and epistemology—which had often been the focus of work on Spinoza—but also any number of aspects of his ethical philosophy, his political and social philosophy, his philosophy of psychology, his philosophy of religion, etc. We have also of late been treated to amazing works situating Spinoza in his immediate historical philosophical context, and also works that chart both the short- and long-term influences on Spinoza and the short- and long-term history of those influenced by Spinoza up to the present-day. We are privileged to live in what is genuinely a golden age of Spinoza studies, and the emergence of this journal is the latest manifestation of the specialness of this period. Another sign of the golden age is the increasing collaboration of philosophers and philosophical historians working on Spinoza from different traditions and in different languages.

What especially makes this an exceptional period in Spinoza studies for me are all the unprecedented insights that I gain from my students and in some cases—although this makes me feel impossibly old and at the same time paradoxically young—the students of my students. Even more important, perhaps, are the entirely new areas within Spinoza studies that my students introduce me to. All I can say is thank you, and this welcome state only confirms that I can look to the Spinozistic future with confidence even as—again—I don't say here anything about it.

In light of all this wonderfulness in Spinoza-land, I am hard-pressed to identify a particular area as the—or one of the—most promising avenues of future research. In particular, I am *not* going to say that a currently vibrant *rationalist* program for interpreting Spinoza—a program which sees Spinoza as guided by the Principle of Sufficient Reason (the PSR), the principle according to which

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each thing or fact has an explanation—is far from exhausted. Of course, I don't have to say—and I won't be saying—that the PSR in the hands of a Spinoza is not the same as the PSR in the hands of a Leibniz or a Wolff or a Kant or a Nāgārjuna or a Plato or whoever. And I won't be reminding you that the topic of exactly what the PSR amounts to in Spinoza is one on which we've made much progress and on which there is much more progress to be made.¹

I also won't be saying that the drastic and disturbing implications of Spinoza's rationalist treatment of normativity and his rationalist rejection of the normative/non-normative distinction and of the practical/theoretical distinction have not yet been understood or appreciated and that a big apocalyptic and invigorating surprise is waiting for us all once we realize the, as it were, enormity of giving up the normative/non-normative distinction. The subversive implications—grounded in Spinoza's rationalism—of *Ethics* 2p49, of the one-and-the-sameness of will and intellect, have yet to be discerned clearly. But that day (evil or good or beyond evil and good) is coming. When it does come, nothing will ever be the same: not our understanding of Spinoza, and especially not the whole edifice of Kantian and most non-Kantian moral philosophies erected as they are on the basis of an only superficially plausible theoretical-practical distinction. This is a distinction that so many philosophers think they cannot live without and that Spinoza has shown both that they must live without and, indeed, that they already live without even though they may not have realized this yet. The upshot of the identity of will and intellect in Spinoza will be—if I can only bring myself to say it—one of the most fertile regions of future Spinoza research.

This rationalist program for understanding Spinoza can also lead us to welcome a long-overdue re-assessment of the idealist interpretations of Spinoza from the late 19th and 20th centuries, interpretations that more or less vanished from the scene with the rise of analytical philosophy. Although I won't, of course, be saying anything like this here, it might be noted that the PSR-reading of Spinoza lends itself to a form of idealism. This is, in part, because the biconditional that links existence and intelligibility and that is expressive of the PSR—if x exists (or obtains), then x is intelligible—at least points to a dependence of being on thought. This priority of thought over being in general (and over extension or the physical) is one hallmark of idealism. Something like this idealism is, it seems, built into the definitional structure of Spinoza's *Ethics*, for substance and mode are each *defined* in terms of conception and thus the *essence* of substance and of mode alike consist in part in being conceived. And, of course, attribute is also defined in terms of the intellect. All of these definitions suggest some form of idealism. So, although I'm not saying this, bring back Joachim and more recent figures like T. L. S. Sprigge who, we can now admit, were onto something all along.²

But perhaps what we should go for isn't exactly idealism. After all, the same rationalist line of thought that involves the equivalence of existence and intelligibility may lead to the view that, given Spinoza's concept of number as involving *arbitrary* distinctions, any multiplicity, any distinctions, any numerosity—even being one in a numerical sense—is unintelligible. This thought appears famously and cryptically in Spinoza's letter to Jelles in 2 June of 1674 (Ep 50/G IV

1 See, e.g., Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Mogens Laerke, “Les Études Spinozistes aux États-Unis: Spinoza et le Principe de Raison Suffisante (‘PSR’ en Anglais), Représentations, Concepts, Idées,” *Archives de Philosophie* 77, (2014): 721–727; Martin Lin, “The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Spinoza,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 133–154.

2 See e.g. Timothy L. S. Sprigge, “Spinoza's Identity Theory”, *Inquiry* 20, no. 1–4, (1977): 419–445.

239b–241b), in which Spinoza says that God is only improperly called one (see also CM I 6/G I 245–249). When unpacked fully, this claim of impropriety can be seen to have implications for not only the alleged oneness of God, but also for the alleged multiplicity of attributes and the alleged multiplicity of modes. All such numerosity, all such distinctions are improper, for Spinoza, or so it can be argued on rationalist grounds.

So we arrive at the view—sometimes associated with the British idealists—that the alleged distinction among the attributes is illusory. There is no multiplicity of attributes. In this light, we can also re-think—after a mere two paragraphs!—whether the label “idealism” is appropriate after all. If idealism presupposes an asymmetry—and thus a distinction—between thought and extension or physicality, then Spinoza is not an idealist after all, simply because there is no genuine multiplicity and hence no genuine asymmetry of attributes. But none of this is something I’m speaking about.

I also won’t be saying that the PSR-reading of Spinoza thus leads to a kind of skeptical reading. Spinoza is known to have little patience with a radical skepticism of the kind that Descartes adumbrates in the First Meditation: just consider the bluntness of §§47 and 48 of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (G II 18, lines 8–25). The form of skepticism that Spinoza rejects challenges not the coherence of our ordinary beliefs, but only the justification for those beliefs. Such a skepticism has been called (by Robert Fogelin and others) epistemological skepticism.³ And Spinoza’s impatience here is grounded in his rationalism: the Cartesian skeptic’s downfall is that he countenances a sharp gap or bifurcation between the world and our beliefs about it, a gap that is unintelligible from a rationalist perspective. This anti-skeptical strand in Spinoza has received considerable attention over the years.⁴ At the same time, however—and this has been more or less overlooked—this same rationalism leads to a deep *conceptual* skepticism in Spinoza, a skepticism that challenges the very coherence of our ordinary concepts and thus of claims containing those concepts. (My appreciation of the significance of the distinction between epistemological and conceptual versions of skepticism has been greatly enhanced through many conversations with Bridger Ehli.) Exactly what are the implications of Spinoza’s conceptual skepticism and exactly how—if at all—it is compatible with his emphatic rejection of epistemological skepticism are I would say—that is, if I were saying anything—topics very much worthy of further pursuit.

Indeed, the pressure in and on Spinoza leading toward a deep conceptual skepticism renders questionable the possibility of even articulating in concepts or in words any kind of Spinozistic position on skepticism, idealism, normativity, and relations. It is, perhaps, most of all for this reason that I won’t be responding to the question of what will be the most exciting areas of Spinozistic research. It may be that about such matters there is, in the end, literally nothing to be said or even thought, as far as conceptual thought goes.

For this reason, I suspect that among such areas of future development—areas that I’m not talking about in discursive terms—a renewed focus on the third kind of knowledge in Spinoza will figure prominently. There has been much excellent work in recent years on the third kind of

3 See, e.g., Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), chapter 1.

4 See, e.g., Dominik Perler, “Spinoza on Skepticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 220–239.

knowledge⁵ and, if I were to say anything, I would point to this topic—*scientia intuitiva*—as the most important area of all, a topic about which, fittingly perhaps, Spinoza says so little. My students have helped me to explore the implications of this vision of Spinoza and, among my most recent students, I would happily highlight in this regard Stephen Harrop and Josefine Klingspor. They have, on more than one occasion, saved me from the excesses of my rationalist reading and have also, all the while, developed their own innovative and unique paths through this most challenging terrain.

These rationalist ruminations point me in a direction that so few are pursuing nowadays or in past days: the connections, parallels, convergences, and disparities between Spinoza and certain non-Western thinkers, such as Laozi, Zhuangzi, Nāgārjuna, and Śrīharṣa, who while working in different traditions from Spinoza, all arguably explore the same rich philosophical vein that, I have claimed, Spinoza taps into so successfully. This view is the connection among the PSR, a distinctionless monism, and a powerful conceptual skepticism. Here I'm excited to mention Alex Douglas' important forthcoming work, *Against Identity (Escaping the Self in Zhuangzi, Spinoza, and René Girard)*, and here also I'm guided by students—in this case, especially by Angela Vettikkal—who know so much more about such connections than I do and who can open the eyes of all of us to this not-yet-fully-tapped richness in Spinoza's thought.

Finally, a methodological suggestion for future work that I won't be making. Strands are OK. Sometimes it seems as though interpreters (not just interpreters of Spinoza) are seeking, when they set about unpacking the thought of a given philosopher, what might be thought to be the holy grail of interpretation: an interpretation that can accommodate all of what a philosopher says on a given topic or at least an interpretation that is not in conflict with anything else the philosopher says. But this is such an unrealistic goal for an interpreter, especially for an interpreter of Spinoza who—paradoxically perhaps, given his overall monism—contains and considers and develops philosophical multitudes. Our job, I would suggest, is to bring Spinoza's texts to life in all their glorious philosophical and historical complexity. Sometimes—often, perhaps—this involves identifying a strand in Spinoza's thought and in his texts and developing and exploring that strand, letting it flourish so that we can appreciate it even if, in the end, it conflicts or is in tension with another strand in his thinking. It is good to bring forth what one sees as genuine lines of thought in Spinoza, even if those lines of thought are not at first or even ever seen to be compatible with other genuine paths in Spinoza's thought. There is no need to diminish one strand in deference to another allegedly more genuine strand. One of our responsibilities as interpreters may be to nurture all of Spinoza's children—all of the strands in his thought—and let them flower, at least for a brief, shining moment. It's not for us to say—and, by the way, it's not for Spinoza to say either—that *this* strand is what Spinoza most cares about and that *this* topic is what most interests Spinoza, and those other topics, whatever they may be, are at best ancillary, do not drive his project, and may even be dismissed. Our role is, perhaps, to be open to all of Spinoza's children and to let them grow and flourish as much as they can.

It is because of this spirit of openness that, I believe, work on Spinoza has come so far, and this spirit of openness will, I also believe, carry us through into the next uncharted, exciting, and unspeakable stage of Spinoza studies.

5 See, e.g., Kristin Primus, "Scientia Intuitiva in the *Ethics*," in *A Critical Guide to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 169–186.

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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](https://doi.org/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.

20 Thanks to Kristin Primus, two anonymous reviewers, and Justin Steinberg for very useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks also to the editors for inviting me to write for this inaugural issue.

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Towards the Future of Spinoza Studies

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1 The Contemporary Scene

It is a pleasure to contribute to the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Spinoza Studies*. I congratulate the founding editors and am grateful for their invitation to reflect on an agenda for the future of Spinoza studies. Any agenda is of course merely *an* agenda, a set of preliminary speculations about future paths for research and reflection, one reader's sense of possibilities after peregrinations in the field. The 400th anniversary of Spinoza's birth and the 350th anniversary of his death approach, and the history of Spinoza reading is long.

Modest aspirations are perhaps especially appropriate in view of the vitality and variety of contemporary Spinoza studies. Spinoza's books and correspondence now attract readers whose efforts range from deciphering his thought to exploring its insights in conjunction with other fields. Pierre Macherey observes that Spinoza's thought is "actual"—alive and current—in three ways. Two are directly visible: Spinoza's philosophy as it is "actually read and worked on, that is, studied for itself," and as it resonates "with the singular preoccupations of each time," that is, as it is frequently revived and revisited. The third emerges more indirectly, because Spinoza's "problems" and "concepts, independently of every explicit citation continue to accompany other forms of thought," sometimes even in the apparent absence of their author. The paradigmatic case of this third life and current actuality is Spinoza's "unusual place" in 18-19th century European philosophy, where he is "simultaneously present, perhaps even central, and relatively ignored."¹ In these three ways, Spinoza's thought can generate critical reflection and creativity.

1 Pierre Macherey, "In a Materialist Way," in *Selected Essays by Pierre Macherey*, ed. Warren Montag, trans. Ted Stolze (New York: Verso, 1998), 125; Omri Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), for example, presents Kant as an instance of this complex relationship.

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Across these actualities, variety reigns. Among those who study Spinoza's thought for itself, the Spinozas are many, some the products of rational reconstruction, others more contextualist. Among contextualist historians, we find Spinozas influenced by Catholic and/or Protestant Scholastic philosophy, Descartes and Dutch Cartesianism, Hobbes, medieval and Renaissance Judaeo-Islamic thought, Machiavelli, Stoicism, classical republicanism, Epicureanism, forms of Neoplatonism, kabbalah of one kind or another, various Protestant Christianities, and/or contemporaneous Dutch politics, culture, and legal theory. These are all part of today's scene. Contemporary readers encounter Spinoza the atheist or pantheist; materialist (even New Materialist) or German idealist; oriented by essences or oriented by power; driven by the principle of sufficient reason or not; liberal-democratic or proto-Marxist. The fascinating and complex reception history of Spinoza, namely, the way his texts and ideas persevere in, through, and as a great many variations, has become a rich field of study,² and the list of conjunctions, including what Tracie Matysik has termed "Spinoza-inflected theoretical fields,"³ is ever-expanding. Scholars working in contemporary metaphysics, neuro-psychology, economics, environmental thought, feminist theory, Buddhist philosophy, cultural studies, affect theory, psychoanalysis, urban studies, geography, and social and political theories across the spectrum find him provocative and useful, even indispensable. It is possible to encounter Spinoza, variously, through his non-teleological and non-anthropocentric account of nature; non-dualistic account of thinking, embodiment, and affectivity; theory of imagination; notion of *conatus*; idea of freedom without volition; ideas of communication and relationality; or political reflections on power, multitudes, and *salus res publica*.

The *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* notes that things, and therefore ideas, interact among themselves (§41/G II 16–17), and E1p36 instructs us that "Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow" (G II 77). Readers skeptical of the proliferation of Spinozas will perhaps recall Spinoza's own view that "Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as

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- 2 Some recent works in this library include Pierre-François Moreau & Mogens Lærke, "Spinoza's Reception," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 405–443. doi: [10.1017/9781316156186.012](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316156186.012); Mogens Lærke, "French Historiographical Spinozism, 1893–2018: Delbos, Gueroult, Vernière, Moreau," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28, no.3 (2020):653–672. doi: [10.1080/09608788.2019.1636199](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2019.1636199) and "Les Études Spinozistes aux États-Unis: Spinoza et le Principe de Raison Suffisante ("PSR" en Anglais), Représentations, Concepts, Idées," in "Bulletin de bibliographie spinoziste XXXVI," *Archives de Philosophie* 77, no.4 (2014): 722–725; Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion and Its Heirs: Marx, Benjamin, Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Pina Totaro, "Études Récentes sur les *Œuvres Postumes* de Spinoza," (unpublished manuscript, 2015); Wiep van Bunge, Henri Krop, Piet Steenbakkers, and Jeroen van de Ven, eds., *The Bloomsbury Companion to Spinoza* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014); Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Daniel Schwartz, *The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); David Wertheim, *Salvation through Spinoza: A Study of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ze'ev Levy, *Baruch Spinoza: seine Aufnahme durch die jüdischen Denker in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001); Olivier Bloch, *Spinoza au XXe Siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1993); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
 - 3 Tracie Matysik, "Writing the History of Spinozism," *History and Theory* 55, (2016): 401–417. doi: [10.1111/hith.10818](https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.10818), 417.

adequate, or clear and distinct ideas” (E2p36/G II 117). Whatever we make of the different interpretations, judging some to resonate clearly with the texts and classifying others as distant variations, nature produces everything, and readers make their judgments. As a result, readings and interpretations of all kinds happen. Have we reached the peak of Spinoza and Spinozism(s)? I doubt it. If Spinoza lived in the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic, we live in a Golden Age of Spinoza and Spinozisms.

What, then, does the field need? Let me begin with a few observations about constructive features of the field since the late 1980s—that is, within my academic memory—and why they merit our ongoing energy and care. My vantage point is mainly the North American academy, and my wishes to a significant degree reflect the commitments of a contextualist historian.

First and foremost, Spinoza studies has been an internationalized field and can become more so.⁴ The landmark 1986 Chicago Spinoza conference organized by Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau gathered scholars from North America, England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Israel, and Australia.⁵ Since then, the strongest connections have been between Anglophone and Francophone readers, both among more traditional historians of philosophy and among scholars influenced by figures such as Gilles Deleuze and Louis Althusser.⁶ We can move beyond these geographic and linguistic communities, and not simply by exporting Euro-American models of scholarship and interpretive agendas. Spinoza studies is flourishing in, among other countries, Argentina and Brazil,⁷ and recent conferences have brought together scholars from the global south and north. Without reifying the categories “north-south” or “east-west,” these kinds of contacts can grow and will undoubtedly enrich our thinking. The covid pandemic has increased the number of international online conferences; as much as many of us prefer in-person gatherings, removing the

4 Cf. Moreau and Lærke: “It is hardly possible today to speak in any clear-cut way about the current reception of Spinoza in terms of national traditions in the way one could in the eighteenth, nineteenth, or even twentieth century,” Moreau and Lærke, “Spinoza’s Reception,” 437.

5 The papers from that conference appeared in Edwin M. Curley and Pierre-François Moreau, eds., *Spinoza: Issues and Directions: Proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference* (Leiden: Brill, 1990). Other examples of the international style in Spinoza studies are Marjorie Grene and Debra Nails, *Spinoza and the Sciences* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1986) and the volumes of the Jerusalem “Spinoza by Year 2000 project” directed by Yirmiyahu Yovel. Margaret D. Wilson, “History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today; and the Case of the Sensible Qualities Source,” *The Philosophical Review* 101, no. 1 (1992): 191–243 comments more generally on the internationalization of scholarship in early modern philosophy.

6 Stetter and Ramond capture current Anglo-French dialogues, see Jack Stetter and Charles Ramond, eds., *Spinoza in Twenty-First-Century American and French Philosophy: Metaphysics, Philosophy of Mind, Moral and Political Philosophy* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). For students of Spinoza’s politics, exchanges with Italian readers, e.g. Antonio Negri and Vittorio Morfino, have been important, but the Marxist tradition is but one of the traditions of Italian Spinoza scholarship. It is also the case that not all national traditions have received similar engagements. Despite the powerful influence of the 18-19th century German Spinoza reception, 20th century and contemporary German scholarship, with the notable exceptions of works by Leo Strauss, Manfred Walther, Wolfgang Barthuschat, and Ursula Renz, has had a smaller audience in the Anglophone world. Similarly, Dutch and Flemish Spinoza scholarship remains puzzlingly under-appreciated. Scholarly readers are familiar with the philological and editorial work of Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkens. The scholarship of Wiep Van Bunge, Henri Krop, Theo Verbeek, and Michiel Wielema deserves a wider readership, as does recent work by, among others, Albert Gootjes, Sonja Lavaert, Jetze Touber, and Dirk Van Miert.

7 To name but a few scholars, Marilena de Souza Chauí, Lia Levy, and Jimena Solé.

obstacle of travel costs can immediately link and expand our scholarly communities. Along these same lines, the impact of decolonial approaches to the histories of philosophy is only beginning to be felt. Spinoza's own entanglement in colonial projects has been the subject of some scholarly attention. We can go further in asking what Spinozan philosophy offers—and does not offer—to readers beyond the usual northern Euro-Atlantic contexts and what new comparative work will show us.

Second, Spinoza studies has been a test case for canon change in the Anglosphere. Once nearly invisible, then a marginal figure and eventually a specialist interest among scholars of early modern European philosophy, Spinoza is now nearly everywhere in North American journals, conferences, and departments. The number of monographs steadily increases. Edited volumes for specialists and non-specialists alike continue to appear.⁸ The “Big Six” of early modern philosophy became the “Big Seven”: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant.⁹ For all sorts of reasons, canonicity has an ambivalent status, but there is no question that Spinoza falls within it. A figure of “radical” enlightenment,”¹⁰ an ancestor of Freud and the “process of dark enlightenment,”¹¹ a thinker with whom leading figures of the European tradition variously draw on and/or struggle

8 Examples in English from the last decade or so include Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael Rosenthal, *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Beth Lord, *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Steven Nadler, *Spinoza and Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Matthew J. Kisner and Andrew Youpa, *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Van Bunge et al., *Bloomsbury Companion*; Kiarina Kordela and Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Spinoza's Authority Volume I: Resistance and Power in Ethics*, and, *Spinoza's Authority Volume II: Resistance and Power in the Political Treatises* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017); Yitzhak Y. Melamed, *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza's Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Beth Lord, *Spinoza's Philosophy of Ratio* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Yitzhak Y. Melamed, *A Companion to Spinoza* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021).

9 See Bruce Kuklick, “Seven Thinkers and How They Grew: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant,” In *Philosophy in History*, eds. Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 125–39. The absence of Hobbes from the original list shows the field's emphasis on metaphysics and epistemology and the Kantian flavor of the whole story. On Spinoza as the seventh member of the early modern list and Hobbes as an eighth, Michael Beaney, “Twenty Years of the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1–12. doi: [10.1080/09608788.2013.757945](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2013.757945). On the shifting fortunes of the history of philosophy and early modern philosophy in particular in analytically-oriented philosophy departments in the United States, see Wilson, “History of Philosophy.” A detailed historiography of Spinoza studies in the Anglophone world from Edwin Curley's *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) to the present boom remains a desideratum. Laerke, “Les Études Spinozistes,” tells part of the story. In addition to the many books and articles that followed Curley's work and the landmark 1986 Chicago conference, the many seminar conferences in early modern philosophy (originated by Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler as the Midwest Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy) have played a very important role in securing the place of Spinoza studies.

10 Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.

11 “Dark enlightenment” is Yirmiyahu Yovel's name for the process that “provoked a sharp awakening from religious and metaphysical illusions, incurring pain and conflict in its wake. For it challenged accepted self-images and enshrined cultural identities, and thereby endangered a whole range of vested psychological interests. But for these very reasons, it was also a movement of emancipation, serving to inspire a richer and more lucid self-knowledge in man, even at the price of unflattering consequences which often shock and dismay” (Yovel, *Spinoza*, 136).

against, sometimes openly, sometimes implicitly, Spinoza has been brought into the academic establishment. Susan James imagines the situation in urban terms:

The history of philosophy is like a city. Epochs of frenetic activity are followed by periods of stagnation; philosophical movements, like neighborhoods, come in and out of fashion; and within them individual philosophers rise and fall. During the last few years, accompanied by a little restoration and town planning, Spinoza has become a more prominent feature of the philosophical cityscape. He appears in the equivalents of tourist guides, archival publications, architectural monographs and local fiction, and there is even a movement to make him a heritage site.¹²

Modern translations of Spinoza's works by Samuel Shirley, Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Matthew Kisner, and, most importantly, Edwin M. Curley have been essential to this process.¹³ It is impossible to overestimate the significance of Curley's translations (together with his scholarly annotations), which made Spinoza widely available in a philosophically sophisticated and consistent English. All of us who philosophize with Spinoza in English—Spinozise?—are in debt to his erudite and generous labor. Equally we are immensely indebted to the editors, translators, and annotators whose labor is providing us, under the direction of Pierre-François Moreau, with a new critical edition of Spinoza's works. Leen Spruit and Pina Totaro brought the Vatican manuscript to print.¹⁴ For many of us, Emilia Giancotti's *Lexicon Spinozanum* remains a landmark.¹⁵ Spinoza's entry into the mainstream of scholarship in early modern philosophy has produced a set of contextual and canon challenges: once viewed mostly as a Cartesian epigone, Spinoza can now be read in dialogue with a host of figures in the medieval, Renaissance, and early modern archive. How Spinoza studies will evolve in dialogue with newer projects of canon change among historians of philosophy, such as the New Narratives project,¹⁶ which emphasizes the recovery of works by women and reverses the history of racist exclusions, and Peter Adamson's *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* project, which offers an increasingly global vision of philosophy in its various forms, remains to be seen. Rethinking the histories of philosophy in its various forms and expanding our libraries will introduce not only new thinkers, but new issues, questions, conceptual resources, and narratives. Spinoza can never be all things to all readers, but our sense of Spinoza's thought will likely shift as our ideas of what philosophy itself might be expand. The New Narratives project, for example, has

12 Susan James, "Why Should We Read Spinoza?" *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 78, (2016): 109–125, 109.

13 There are modern translations into French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Hebrew, Persian, and perhaps other languages as well. WorldCat shows translations of Spinoza into Arabic, Chinese, Japan, and Korean, but I am not certain whether some of the items are new translations or reprints. On the recent history of translating Spinoza in Iran, see Sina Mirzaei, "The Reception of Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Philosophies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 1–18. doi: [10.3390/philosophies6020042](https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies6020042).

14 Leen Spruit and Pina Totaro, *The Vatican Manuscript of Spinoza's Ethica* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

15 Emilia Giancotti, *Lexicon Spinozanum* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970).

16 "New Narratives in the History of Philosophy" is led by Lisa Shapiro (Simon Fraser University), Marguerite Deslauriers (McGill University), and Karen Detlefsen (University of Pennsylvania) and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The New Narratives group collaborates widely with scholars in and beyond North America who are also working on canon change and expansion.

reinvigorated discussions of social and personal freedom and the philosophy of education. Each of these is a rich topic in Spinoza's thought.

Finally, Spinoza's many friends have made for a fairly pluralistic academic community. Early members of the North American Spinoza Society will recall its small numbers and the correlative need for camaraderie. Helped by the secure place of early modern European philosophy in the contemporary university curriculum, Spinoza studies has grown as a subfield and counts among its members readers from a wide range of institutions.¹⁷ That said, no field in philosophy, especially no growing field, can escape the profession's habitual divisions, prestige economies and status hierarchies, not to mention the orthodoxies and establishments they produce. Scholarship is shot through with institutional power, and the impediments to curiosity and pluralism are many. Crossing the persistent boundaries of so-called analytic and so-called continental philosophy has enlivened the field. It might be said, too, that historians of philosophy are something of a third camp, neither analytic nor continental, and of course historians themselves are quite methodologically diverse.¹⁸ Likewise, although the Anglophone community of early modern Europeanists has been dominated by readers interested in metaphysics and epistemology, it has also welcomed readers concerned with Spinoza's ethics, politics, and theory of the affects, as well as readers studying his physics and connections to early modern medicine. Despite the popular image of Spinoza as the ultimate systematic rationalist, the most abstract and intellectualist of philosophers, Spinoza the analyst of affects, political events, and socio-political institutions is alive and well.¹⁹ Spinoza readers have moreover made common cause with others interested in thinking outside the boundaries of Cartesian dualism, Christian problematics of free will, teleology and providence, as well as anthropocentrism and the notion of human beings as *imperii in imperio*. For scholars committed to rethinking human embodiment and its relation to thinking, the centrality of imaginative and affective life, politics and institutional design, concepts of relationality, transindividuality, and ideas of human beings as *partes naturae*, Spinoza has been a philosophical forebear and continues to serve as a critical interlocutor.

17 Curricular guarantees are, it must be said, a mixed blessing. Sometimes being viewed primarily in terms of teaching makes our field less autonomous than it might be, especially when old worries about the relationship of history and philosophy prevail.

18 On method in early modern philosophy see the essays collected in Mogens Lærke, Justin E. H. Smith and Eric Schliesser, eds., *Philosophy and Its History. Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a recent exchange, see Michael Della Rocca, "Interpreting Spinoza: The Real is the Rational," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2015): 523–535. doi: [10.1353/hph.2015.0049](https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2015.0049) and Daniel Garber, "Superheroes in the History of Philosophy: Spinoza, Super-Rationalist," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2015): 507–521. doi: [10.1353/hph.2015.0045](https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2015.0045). As Garber observes, he and Della Rocca can be said to recapitulate themes from mid-20th century Spinoza debates in France.

19 Recent essays and books by Étienne Balibar, Sandra Leonie Field, Moira Gatens and Genviève Lloyd, Susan James, Frédéric Lordon, Mogens Lærke, Vittorio Morfino, Antonio Negri, Hasana Sharp, Justin Steinberg, and Manfred Walther show the vitality of Spinoza's political philosophy. Filippo del Lucchese's series at Edinburgh University Press, which has provided English translations of the classics of French Spinoza literature (e.g. books by Alexandre Matheron and Pierre-François Moreau) has also been salutary for the field.

2 To What Else, Then, Might We Aspire?

Nearly a century ago, Harry Austryn Wolfson imagined the task for Spinoza readers as “reconstructing the *Ethics* out of scattered slips of paper figuratively cut out of the philosophic literature available to Spinoza.”²⁰ Wolfson’s view of Spinoza’s library was as expansive as his view of Spinoza’s philosophical creativity was constricted. No great philosopher is reducible to fragments torn from other books, and traditional *Quellenforschung* is manifestly a problematic way of reading a thinker so clearly engaged in redefinition, transformation, and innovation. At the other extreme, however, a completely de-contextualized Spinoza is an illegible Spinoza. Spinoza extolled the immediate clarity of Euclid,²¹ yet he painstakingly examined, clarified, and variously reconfigured, rendered untenable or discarded, and reinvented the philosophical languages he inherited. The *Ethics*, like the PPC and the CM, comments on other thinkers, and, like the TTP and the TP, begins *in medias res*.

As the list of Spinozas with which I began this paper suggests, at present we face a strikingly fragmented set of contextualizations and interpretations. As readers, we have brought our own frames of reference and archives to Spinoza’s texts and so produced our versions of his thought. We hope that we are not merely prophets attempting to describe a deity,²² yet it is difficult to gather and assemble our readings. Steven Nadler, surely one of Spinoza’s most erudite readers, cautions that

Among the great, dead philosophers of the early modern period, Baruch Spinoza is perhaps the most deeply fascinating but mysterious and enigmatic of them all. Whether it is due to the sheer difficulty of navigating the “geometric method” and esoteric jargon of his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics*; or because so much of his life remains for us in the shadows, given the frustrating lack of extant documentation, the “real” Spinoza seems often to escape us. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Spinoza has also become one of the most mythologized (and even fictionalized) philosophers in history.²³

Historical-hermeneutical challenges of “the ‘real’ Spinoza” notwithstanding, it seems to me that a more synthetic sense of Spinoza’s philosophy is a key desideratum for our field. We need to explore how and to what degree our various Spinozas might coalesce. Seeking a more integrated view of Spinoza’s thought should not force us to construct a perfectly unified—self-consistent and univocal—or a fully transparent Spinoza. Historical figures and their books, even in the case of philosophers we experience as systematic, are frequently quite a bit more complicated and inevitably somewhat opaque. Questions about development and moments of rethinking, genres and audiences,

20 Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Process of His Reasoning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 3.

21 TTP 7 (C II: 185/G III 111)

22 See, e.g., TTP 2 on Isaiah’s and Ezekiel’s incommensurate visions of God’s glory as it left the temple: “Isaiah saw Seraphim with six wings, while Ezekiel saw beasts with four wings. Isaiah saw God clothed and sitting on a royal throne, while Ezekiel saw him as like a fire. There is no doubt that each of them saw God as he was accustomed to imagine him” (C II: 99/G III 34).

23 Steven Nadler, “The Jewish Spinoza.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 3 (2009): 491–510. doi: [10.1353/jhi.0.0044](https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.0.0044), 491.

the impact of events such as political crises or scientific and technological change, access to books and interlocutors, as well a host of questions about unresolved matters, unthematized questions or tensions, and emergent difficulties in anyone's thinking demand our attention and engage our judgment.

We need, accordingly, both ideas about the central dynamics or axial concerns in Spinoza's thought and a suitably complex, multi-faceted, multi-directional sense of his philosophical activities. There is no reason to think that we must choose between Spinoza the reader of Latin and Spinoza the reader of Hebrew (and Hebrew translations of Arabic texts), let alone the Spanish, Portuguese, and/or Dutch Spinoza. We know, for example, that Spinoza's familiarity with Descartes, Maimonides, and Gersonides comes together in E2p7s;²⁴ similarly Spinoza's formulation of *conatus* puts him in dialogue with Latin- and Hebrew-language predecessors.²⁵ An example from political philosophy might be the intertwining of a Farabian-Maimonidean notion of political prophecy with republican themes in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*.²⁶ Rather than pursuing a univocal Spinoza to the exclusion of all others, we can instead attune ourselves to the various engagements and intertexts suggested by his dense, if not always perfectly explicit, networks of reference. Far from being a closed system, the *Ethics* is an open book and opens out to other books.

For similar reasons, there is no need to "choose" between the metaphysical-epistemological Spinoza and the affective, ethical, and political Spinoza. These disciplinary sub-divisions, along with concepts such as systematicity, belong to our vocabulary, not Spinoza's. The five parts of the *Ethics* quite obviously traverse these boundaries, and sticking to them generates insuperable problems: where, precisely, would *Ethics* 5—for those of us who believe in reading it²⁷—fit in such a schema? Likewise, parts of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise* read like a mini-*Ethics*. Scholars have made significant progress in understanding the relationships between Spinoza's early and mature works, and of course the correspondence has been a crucial source of insight, but our discussions of how to conceptualize the relationships of the *Ethics*, the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and the confoundingly unfinished *Political Treatise* need to grow. Given the distinct styles and audiences and the overlapping concerns of these works, much more work is needed to think about their interconnections and how the various works respectively illuminate one another.

Whether this re-thought Spinoza will resemble the familiar picture of the arch-rationalist, systematic philosopher—the Spinoza, say, of the PSR as proposed by Michael Della Rocca or the metaphysician depicted by Yitzhak Melamed—or will emerge as a figure whose interests gather

24 Carlos Fraenkel, "Maimonides' God and Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 2 (2006): 169–215; Julie R. Klein, "Spinoza's Debt to Gersonides," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 24, no. 1 (2003): 19–43.

25 Warren Zev Harvey, "Gersonides and Spinoza on Conatus," *Aleph* 12, no. 2 (2012): 273–297. doi: [10.2979/aleph.12.2.273](https://doi.org/10.2979/aleph.12.2.273); Noa Shein, "Not Wholly Finite: The Dual Aspect of Finite Modes in Spinoza," *Philosophia* 46, (2018): 433–451. doi: [10.1007/s11406-017-9918-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-017-9918-9).

26 Although she does not explore Spinoza's use of medieval views of prophecy, Victoria Kahn notes "the way the narrative of the [*Theologico-Political*] *Treatise* translates Mosaic political theology into Machiavellian civil religion" (Victoria A. Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 134).

27 Compare Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984), 357. Fortunately, Bennett's judgment has not been widely accepted.

around recognizable interests yet exhibit some irreducible heterogeneity remains to be seen. Different readers will of course reach their own judgments. My own view is that the parts of the *Ethics* rely on different starting points or perspectives and are interconnected but not fully derivable from or reducible to one another. Spinoza's politics, for example, while related to his metaphysics, points to the role of practical rationality; Spinoza emphasizes an imaginative and rational *ars ad concordiam et fidem* and drive for security. As shaped by imagination and human ends, politics is a set of conventions; while it is not a- or un-natural, neither does it follow deductively from claims about Spinozan nature, which in any case vary infinitely and non-teleologically. Gilles Deleuze pictured Spinoza as a sort of irrepressible corpse, the un-dead philosopher who defies easy characterization and appropriation. Having been assigned a prominent place in the succession of Cartesians, Spinoza "bulges out of that place in all directions; there is no living corpse who raises the lid of his coffin so powerfully, crying so loudly, 'I am not one of yours.'"²⁸ For Deleuze, the undead philosopher chiefly resists being assimilated to the history of Cartesianism. For us, that same powerful resistance might apply elsewhere as well. Building another coffin, or to borrow an image Spinoza reflects on, carrying the memory of broken shards and the fantasy of wholeness in a search for the promised land, is not the goal.

As a final desideratum, I suggest that we increase our attention to Spinoza as a philosopher of everyday life. Tempting as it is to focus on Spinoza's vision of freedom and the eternity of the mind, on relations of substance, attributes, and modes, or even on the design of states and institutions, Spinoza is profoundly focused on the path from ordinary to more philosophically-informed experience. The *Ethics* is, after all, an ethics, and Spinoza's moral philosophy, precisely as distinct from traditions oriented by juridical models (whether religious or Kantian) and as a distinctive evocation of Stoic and virtue ethics themes, offers much for our reflection. However, much we aspire to the forms of freedom he describes, we live, he reminds us, "in constant change" (E5p39s/G II 305) and must navigate our ordinary affairs as constructively as possible. Affects, namely "affections of the body" and at the same time "ideas of affections," manifest changes in our power to persevere in existing as emotional experience (E3def3/G II 139). They are a fundamental register of human experience for individuals and collectivities. To the extent that we can understand our affects, resolving some by causal explanation and remedying others with assistive images and maxims that enable us to act as if we understood (E5p10s, p20s), our power to persevere in existing, and so our joy, increases. Becoming philosophical is an education in desire, embodiment, and sociality as well as thinking. Without working through the intricacies and dynamics of human affairs, there is no path to freedom, for individuals or for states. Spinoza's meticulous, searching investigation of human affects, and indeed the logic of affect, with all of its fluctuations and constitutive ambivalences, plays of singularity and sharing (as communication, imitation, and contagion), and, consequently, over-determination, offers us the most concrete Spinoza, the close observer of ordinary life and guide to its transformability.

To be sure, Spinoza's readers, particularly those influenced by Deleuze, by feminism, and/or by psychoanalysis, have done considerable work in clarifying his account of passive, imaginative

28 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 15. Elsewhere Deleuze explains that Spinoza "more than any other gave me the feeling of a gust of air from behind each time you read him, of a witch's broom which he makes you mount" (quoted in Macherey, "Materialist Way, 119).

affects and active, rational, or intellectual affects as ways of living. They have, moreover, shown how affects traverse familiar boundaries of inner and outer, individual and social constitution and experience, and stability and fluidity. How Spinoza studies might interact with new scholarship in the history of affect remains to be seen. Thinking in terms of affect is another way to understand what Spinoza says about physics and cognition, and another way to reconfigure our attachments to teleology, free will, and sovereign selves. It is a perfect laboratory for learning how to think when we conceive nature in terms of power and dynamism. Other commentators have not entirely ignored Spinoza's acuity about emotional life, but it seems somehow still difficult for philosophers to put affect at the center of our study.²⁹ Spinoza, however, assigns it a central position. He is intensely concerned with the feeling of life and our experience of nature's power.³⁰

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29 Some notable recent exceptions include Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza: L'expérience et l'éternité* (Paris: PUF, 1994); Moira Gatens and Genvieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999); Chantal Jaquet, *L'unité du corps et de l'esprit: Affects, actions, et passions chez Spinoza* (Paris: PUF, 2004); Syliane, Malinowski-Charles, *Affects et conscience chez Spinoza: l'automatisme dans le progrès éthique* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2004); Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lisa Shapiro, "Spinoza on Imagination and the Affects," in *Emotional Minds: The Passions and the Limits of Pure Inquiry in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Sabrina Ebbersmayer (Berlin: De Gruyter 2012), 89–104, doi: [10.1515/9783110260922.89](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110260922.89); Lilli Alanen, "Spinoza on the Passion and Self-Knowledge: The Case of Pride," in *Emotion and Cognitive Life in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*, eds. Martin Pickavé and Lisa Shapiro (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 234–254; Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Noa Naaman-Zauderer, ed., *Freedom, Action, and Motivation in Spinoza's Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2019). The recently published discussion of hope by Moira Gatens, Justin Steinberg, Aurelia Armstrong, Susan James, and Martin Saar is a perfect illustration of readers from different outlooks focusing on affects. See Moira Gatens, Justin Steinberg, Aurelia Armstrong, Susan James and Martin Saar, "Spinoza: thoughts on hope in our political present," *Contemporary Political Theory* 20, (2021): 200–231. doi: [10.1057/s41296-020-00406-4](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00406-4).

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Ab placito humanum and the Normativity of Human Laws in the *Theological-Political Treatise*

Lia Levy*

Keywords: human laws, normativity, human decisions, metaphysics, naturalization of politics

1 Introduction

The few passages in Spinoza's work in which he focuses on the concept of human law have not received as much scholarly attention as passages focused on other themes, but they have still been very well examined, as evidenced by, for example, the collection edited by André Campos in 2015, which brought together 21 articles written between 1948 and 2010.¹ It is true that most of these studies do not directly aim to determine whether Spinoza adopts a normative conception of human

- 1 See also, for example, Gail Belaief, "The Relation between Civil Law and a Higher Law: A Study of Spinoza's Legal Philosophy," *The Monist* 49, no. 3 (1965): 504–518. doi: [10.5840/monist196549332](https://doi.org/10.5840/monist196549332) and Gail Belaief, *Spinoza's Philosophy of Law* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1971); Edwin Curley, "The State of Nature and its Law in Hobbes and Spinoza," *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 1 (1991): 97–117. doi: [10.5840/philtopics199119114](https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199119114); Alexandre Matheron, "La déduction de la loi divine et les stratégies discursives de Spinoza," *Cahiers de Fontenay* 10, (1991): 53–80; Jean-Marie Beyssade, "Norme et essence chez Spinoza," in *Spinoza et la Norme*, ed. Jacqueline Lagrée (Besançon: Presses Universitaires Franc-Comtoises, 2002); Manfred Walther, "Natural Law, Civil Law, and International Law in Spinoza," *Cardozo Law Review* 2, (2003): 657–65. URL: https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/cdozo25&div=30&g_sent=1&casa_token=&collection=journals; Jon Miller, "Spinoza and the Concept of a Law of Nature," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2003): 257–276. Marilena Chauí, "La déconstruction de l'idée de loi divine dans le chapitre IV du *Traité Théologico-Politique de Spinoza*," *Historia Philosophica* 4, (2006): 33–46; Michael LeBuffe, "Spinoza's Normative Ethics," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 37, no. 3 (2007): 371–391. doi: [10.1353/cjp.2007.0022](https://doi.org/10.1353/cjp.2007.0022); Donald Rutherford, "Spinoza and the Dictates of Reason," *Inquiry* 51, no. 5 (2008): 485–511. doi: [10.1080/00201740802421402](https://doi.org/10.1080/00201740802421402) and Donald Rutherford, "Spinoza's Conception of Law: Metaphysics and Ethics," In *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, eds. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 143–167. doi: [10.1017/CBO9780511781339.009](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781339.009); André Campos, *Spinoza's Revolutions in Natural Law* (London: Springer, 2012); Pina Totaro, "Law and Dissolution of Law in Spinoza," in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021) 384–393.

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law² in the political-legal field or, if he does adopt such a conception, what the conditions under which he could do so could be, given the logical-causal necessitarianism and naturalism of his metaphysics,³ explicitly reaffirmed in paragraph 3 of Chapter IV of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (G III 58–68). However, this problem is unavoidable, and it is precisely to this matter that I would like to contribute, in a rather modest way, by examining the answer that Spinoza himself offers in the passage just cited.⁴

My purpose is to demonstrate that these four paragraphs clarify how and why Spinoza can introduce a source of regulation of our actions (which is referred to by the expression “*ab placito humanum*”) that is different from the principles that necessarily follow from our nature without violating the basic tenets of his metaphysics.

Still, I hope to be able to show that Spinoza provides reasons for supposing that what he calls “human law” has an *intrinsic* normativity, that is, for supposing that the demand for obedience (binding force) that constitutes its meaning as a principle regulating human action is not extrinsically added to it by threats and promises but is instead rooted in its *ab placito humanum sanction*, which is explained by *motivations*.⁵ The rewards and punishments defined by the legislator, which Spinoza recognizes to be necessary to obtain *de facto* obedience, must be assumed to have this intrinsic normativity.⁶ In this way, the *potentia* of each individual, which is the fundamental thesis of natural law, does not become a more sophisticated version of “might makes right” (whether this might is thought of as physical, psychological, or even intellectual), which is something Spinoza rejects in several places.⁷ Insofar as certain laws are rooted in the aspect of human nature referred to by the expression “*ab placito humanum*,” I also intend to explain how they can be understood as normative in Spinoza’s philosophy. I should note, however, that my claims are limited to the metaphysical theory of actions, rather than their political or legal aspects.

I begin (I) by clarifying the understanding of the concept of normativity that will be assumed in this article. This is not a notion used by Spinoza himself, and there has been much dispute over

2 This qualification is important because Spinoza explicitly states in several passages that the concept of divine law should not be understood normatively, that is, as a command whose disobedience would be punishable (cf., among others, E4p68s/G II 261–262; TTP 2.32/G III 37; TTP 4.26–27/G III 63, and TTP 4.38–39/G III 65–66; TP 2.6/G III 278; Ep 19 to Willem van Blijenbergh/ G IV 89–95). What seems to me to remain open, and which will be the subject of this article, is just the case of human law, which is a concept that will serve as the basis for the formulation of the pact that is at the origin of the Republic and, by extension, of civil laws.

3 I would like to express my gratitude to anonymous referees for pressing me to address this aspect of Spinoza’s philosophy. I would also like to thank Kristin Primus and Andrea Sangiacomo for their insightful comments and adjustments.

4 A brief analysis of this same passage can be found in Walther, “Natural Law,” 659–660.

5 I use the term ‘motivation’ rather than ‘reason’ in this context only to emphasize that individuals acting both in accordance with reason’s dictates (and thus based on what we call ‘reasons’) and in accordance with their passions (and thus based on what I call ‘motivations’) must be able to sanction laws of the second kind, which are at the heart of the pact that underpins the Republic. Indeed, the pact is necessary precisely because “it’s far from true that everyone can always be easily led just by the guidance of reason” (TTP 16.22/G III 193). Thus, even though Spinoza shows that the pact is useful for everyone, few, if any, individuals actually understand its true value. This poses a challenge to the TTP’s version of contractualism, whose explanation cannot be based solely on the advantages and rationality of the contract. However, the author’s strategy for addressing this issue will not be discussed here.

6 See TTP 6.6/G III 58–59; 16.22–24/G III 193.

7 See in particular TTP 16.24/G III 193 and TTP 16.32–36/G III 194–195.

its appropriate interpretation. Next (II), I present my understanding of the problem introduced in the first paragraph of Chapter IV of the TTP. The subsequent sections develop my analysis of the first four paragraphs of that chapter. I first establish (III) the theses of the first two paragraphs, which underpin the subsequent two, which will be the object of a more detailed analysis (IV–V). I will conclude by gathering the main results of the previous analyses, in order to put together an explanation of the concept of law that depends on *ab placito humanum*, as well as clarifying the reasons for its introduction in Spinoza's theory.

1 Conditions for the Application of the Concept of Normativity

As we know, the term 'normativity' is not part of Spinoza's vocabulary. If 'norm' is really present in his work, especially in the epistemological context, it means the same as criterion or *index*,⁸ and does not encompass what is usually understood by the term in the normative sense.⁹ However, the philosopher employs other terms whose use in these texts strongly suggests that he accepts the idea of a prescriptive rule.¹⁰ In this regard, the first four paragraphs of Chapter 4 of the *Theological-Political Treatise* provide an unique opportunity to evaluate my hypotheses, namely that Spinoza recognizes that human beings are capable of producing certain normative principles of action and of self-regulating themselves by them, and that these principles—in some sense—do not necessarily follow from human nature; and that the meaning of this claim, as well as the arguments supporting it, do not contradict, but rather rely on, his naturalism. As a result, it is crucial to establish the conditions under which I intend to apply the concept of normativity to the analysis of the proposed text.

For the purposes of this essay, I consider a statement to be normative only if it is *prescriptive*, and where its purpose is to guide the actions of human beings within a social context, that is, in inter-human practices. So understood, a normative statement must have certain syntactic and semantic characteristics. It cannot be declarative, nor necessarily have truth-value, for it does not state what—or how—things are, but rather what—how—they should be.¹¹ Therefore, its most basic form must be

8 TIE, 35–49, 69, 75–76, 95/G II 15–19, 26, 28–29, 34–35; E1App/G II 84; E2p43s/G II 124–125. In this regard, see Beyssade, "Norme," 20, who notes that this term, for example, does not appear in the *Lexicon* by Emilia Giancotti-Boscherini, *Lexicon Spinozanum* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1970).

9 The characterization that follows is inspired by the works of John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," *The Philosophical Review* 64, (1955): 3–32. URL: https://www.pdcnet.org/phr/content/phr_1955_0064_0001_0003_0032; Georg H. von Wright, *Norm and Action: A Logical Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969); Christine Korsgaard, "The Sources of Normativity," *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 12 (Utah: University of Utah, 1992), 19–112; Campos, *Spinoza's Revolutions*.

10 As, for example, 'prescription' (*praescriptio*), 'dictates' (*dictamen*), 'commands' [*mandatum*], 'law' (*lex*). These terms occur mostly in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and in the *Political Treatise*, but are also found in the *Ethics* and in some letters.

11 On prescriptions having no truth value, cf. Von Wright, *Norm*. There are, in fact, meta-normative theories that advocate in favor of a normative realism, according to which normative statements are propositions that describe normative facts or properties, and therefore bear a value of truth (cf. Ralph Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Stephen Finlay, "Defining Normativity," in *Dimensions of Normativity: New Essays on Metaethics and Jurisprudence*, eds. David Plunkett, Scott Shapiro and Kevin Toh

that of *imperative* statements that are irreducible to declarative statements. In this sense, normative statements presume the validity of the distinction between *is* and *ought*. This distinction need not be understood to be ontological: if it were, there would not be a question about the possibility of imperatives in Spinoza's philosophy.

Furthermore, in order for certain statements to be thought of as genuinely normative within a political-legal context, they must be capable of containing deontic terms that modalize the prescriptions expressed in imperative statements, making them manifestations of rights and duties, or even *prescriptions of binding character* (or normative force) to which promises of punishment in cases of disobedience are legitimately added.

It will be up to the semantics of these operators to explain the nature of this binding character and the basis of the obedience they postulate. This explanation can be based on different theories: threat of use of force/violence, psychological manipulation, *bottom-up* constructions in specific legal practices (legal pragmatism), various forms of consequentialism, deontological theories, etc. However, not all of them account for normativity in itself, because the first three only explain (because they intend nothing other than to explain) the *fact* of obedience (and, therefore, the effectiveness of norms) and not the *legitimacy* of a *demand* for obedience. By explaining the effectiveness of laws, these theories open the door to an explanation that reduces normative statements to a set of declarative statements (generalized or not). The other alternatives mentioned, as well as other theories, aim to explain not why we actually obey legal rules, but why we *must* obey them, thus posing the problem of their groundwork.¹² Apparently, there are a whole range of *prima facie* options available for evaluating Spinoza's stance, provided its utilitarian and consequentialist character is recognized.

The most crucial aspect to my point is that the addition of rewards and penalties to the prescriptions that these terms are a part of cannot account for the normative force that enables deontic terms to be said to express obligations, prohibitions, and permissions, as I have already stated, albeit through a different argument. The actions to which the individual would be subject in the case of performing certain actions in a social context can only be rightly conceived as sanctions because the condition of their application is obedience to a prescription with normative force. It is the normative force of that prescription which establishes rights and duties as such, and only in relation to them can these actions be considered legitimate penalties and rewards. The correct application of the concepts of reward and punishment supposes the bounding force without which the law cannot constitute rights and duties as such. In this sense, explaining the force and binding nature of normative prescriptions would imply, in my view, a vicious circle.

Since normative statements are guidelines for *acting* (or modifying reality) and not the description of facts or actions already performed, their scope should include actions that *may* be performed by the individuals they are directed to and exclude what is *impossible* for them to do. Its

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 187–220. This position, however, is incompatible with Spinoza's philosophy, so I will not consider it in my nominal definition of normativity or normative force.

12 This does not mean that these theories should not also explain the *effectiveness* of these norms. G. von Wright argues that this force depends, as to its effectiveness, on the institution of sanctions and rewards (Von Wright, *Norms*, 7). Spinoza, like Hobbes, states the same thing in several passages, but does not consider this a necessary condition of the normative force of human law, but rather a psychological expedient to ensure its effectiveness in specific cases.

significance assumes, therefore, that it is possible to distinguish, within a universe of *possible* and *contingent* actions, those which *should*, *should not*, and are *allowed* to be done.¹³

For these reasons, a normative statement cannot have factual or causal relationships with the actions to which it refers, but only logical ones. Nevertheless, it must be possible to determine whether or not the normative statement has been *fulfilled*, i.e., possible to ascertain whether what it prescribes was (or was not) actually done in accordance with what is prescribed. This type of statement is *axiological* and has an evaluative function: it assigns a positive value to the actions that *must* be performed, a negative value to those that *must not* be performed and is neutral vis-à-vis allowed actions. These aspects give it a dual function: it *guides* future actions and *evaluates* past actions.

But I would say that these statements have intrinsic normative force only if, in addition to these formal characteristics, they are legitimately effective and not only mechanically or psychologically so.¹⁴ None of these conditions are sufficient to ensure that such an utterance has normative force if it does not impose *legitimate obligations*, that is, actions that determine and *are understood as authoritatively* determining *what we must* do in certain more or less specified circumstances.

The biggest obstacles to applying this concept of normativity to the expressions of what is designated by *apparently* normative terms in Spinoza's works, besides making its assumptions compatible with the core tenets of his metaphysics, is the absence, in his theory, of the theses usually drawn on to act as the foundation of obligation. C. Korsgaard and A. Campos mention four types of normativity grounds available in modernity:¹⁵ (i) the *will of an authority*, that is, of someone endowed with a legitimate statute to issue commands (legal voluntarism); (ii) *reason* as the supreme source of true knowledge of being, goodness and justness (intellectualism and/or legal realism); (iii) human nature as naturally containing values that can be apprehended and endorsed *reflexively*; (iv) a combination of some of the previous types.¹⁶

13 A reader familiar with Spinoza's philosophy might be tempted to conclude that, given this condition, the concept of normativity cannot be applied anachronistically to understand his political philosophy. Here I ask the reader to be patient and wait for the arguments that will be presented later.

14 To this end, as Campos (*Spinoza's Revolutions*) observes, they must at least be *uttered* so that they are *known* (in the case of the legal context) and their temporal preservation must be ensured by social devices or practices. They must therefore be chronologically prior to the actions they aim at regulating. Campos (*ibid.*) also adds as a condition that statements with normative force be also *logically* prior to the actions they aim at regulating. However, I believe that this requirement does not apply to all types of utterances with normative force, but only to those that *create* or *institute* practices or new types of action, such as those identified by Rawls ("Two Concepts") with his practical concept of law, by Von Wright (*Norm*) for the rules of logic, games, and grammar, and by Searle, *Speech Acts*, with his concept of constitutive rules. Although I believe that it is possible to apply these concepts in some way to Spinoza's theory of human law, I do not think that the passage to be analyzed provides sufficient allowance for doing so.

15 Korsgaard, "Sources;" Campos, *Spinoza's Revolutions*.

16 A. Campos (*ibid.*) argues that the four types are incompatible with Spinoza's philosophy. LeBuffe (2007) and Rutherford (LeBuffe, "Normative Ethics;" Rutherford, "Spinoza" and "Spinoza's Conception"), by believing, at least in certain cases, in the role that reason can play in guiding our actions, seem to adopt a stance that is akin to option (iii). C. Korsgaard ("Sources") also includes a fifth alternative that she associates with Kant and which she calls "the call for autonomy." Although I believe this type may be used to think about Spinoza's position, I don't take it into consideration here to avoid adding another anachronistic bias.

Even if we can prove that Spinoza recognized that human law has all the *formal* characteristics of normative statements, it would still remain to prove that his philosophy is capable of grounding human law's legitimately binding dimension. Without this proof, Spinoza's theory could only explain human laws effectiveness in the social control of individuals through the impact that the sanctions and rewards stipulated by the legislator have on the manipulation of the passions of individuals who do not act by reason.¹⁷

The first paragraphs of Chapter 4 of the TTP allow us to glimpse a *very peculiar* form of legal voluntarism that allows us to attribute to the imaginative process that underpins it an epistemic status and a broader and more fundamental legal-political function than that of a necessary but irrelevant illusion.¹⁸ We will see that all the above-mentioned conditions that are necessary and sufficient for the application of the concept of normativity are met by the concept of *human law* in Chapter 4. For this reason, there may be, within the restricted scope of the republic, the *will of a legitimate authority* to issue commands (civil laws).

2 The Problem

On the one hand, it is generally agreed that the metaphysics defended by Spinoza in the *Ethics* (and even in the TTP) is naturalistic, causally deterministic, and necessitarian. In the *Ethics*, the philosopher maintains that everything that is, necessarily is, either by virtue of its own essence (E1p7/G II 49) or by virtue of its cause (E1p21, p28/G II 65–66, 69–70), concluding that there is absolutely nothing that is real and contingent (E1p33 and s1/G II 73–74). Everything that occurs, necessarily occurs, and it is determined by necessary natural causes (E1p24–27/G II 67–68); in the case of finite durational things, whatever occurs is determined by an infinite series of finite causes that operate necessarily (E1p28). The fundamental characteristics of the causality model of the ontological system are spontaneity (E1p17/G II 61) and immanence (E1p18/G II 63–64), and it is equivalent to or analogous to logical relations among the relata (E1p16/G II 60). No causality characterized as transcendent, transitive, or arbitrary (and therefore unnatural) can be accepted in his system. As a result, his assertion that God is the first and only cause of all reality is completely incompatible with monotheistic and/or creationist views of divinity; so much so that the expression *Deus sive Natura* is more than a metaphor in Spinoza's philosophy; it accurately designates the naturalistic character of his philosophy.¹⁹ In this sense, the title of this article, by including the word 'normativity,' foreign to the spirit and the letter of his work, is certainly a provocation.

However, this notion of normativity finds its *raison d'être* in the fact that Spinoza opens his chapter on the concept of law in the TTP by distinguishing (and thereby recognizing) two types of law, according to the nominal definition he presents. One type conforms perfectly with his

17 This hypothesis is actually considered by Spinoza in TTP 4.7, which suggests to its interpreters that it is only this extrinsic normative force that Spinoza accords to human laws. However, this passage is subsequent to the paragraphs analyzed here and, therefore, its interpretation hinges on them and not the other way around.

18 This expression is used in the way set out above, namely, to refer to a theory that assigns the source of normativity to the will of an authority.

19 Cf. E4pref/ G II 206. See also E3pref: "God, or Nature [acts according to] "laws and rules" (*leges & regulae*) [that] "are everywhere [*ubique*] and always [*semper*] the same" (G II 138).

necessitarian naturalism (a principle of regularity that depends on the necessity of nature) while the other type, at least *prima facie*, is entirely *incompatible* with his naturalism, since it is said to depend on a principle distinct from the necessity of nature.

The first type of law lies at the basis of Spinoza's own version of natural law, in which law, right, and power (*potentia*) are interspersed (TTP 16.2; 3–5/G III 189ff), but will not be addressed as themes or problems here. It is still at the root of his thesis that divine law is not a command, a rule that is bound to be disobeyed; it stems from the necessity of nature just as much as natural laws do. Its representation in the form of an imperative serves exclusively to guide us in our actions toward the knowledge of God and toward our beatitude (TTP 4.38–41/G III 66).

It is the allusion to the second type of law that astonishes any present-day reader who is minimally familiar with Spinoza's philosophy: what principle could this be, if the metaphysics of the *Ethics* teaches us that there is nothing real that does not originate from the necessity of nature?²⁰ Even more surprising is the fact that this second principle is said to depend, according to the text, on what we may call "human decision," or even "human decree" ("*ab placito humanum*").

Traditionally, in order for a theory to invoke a human decision or a decree to explain at least some of our actions, it must recognize that we have a principle or absolute power to act, that is, that we may be the absolute first cause of these actions, or that we are capable of determining ourselves, without being determined by external causes, to perform certain actions that would not otherwise take place. The adoption of this principle into a theory of action does not necessarily imply that the actions resulting from it are entirely random or devoid of intelligibility. It is perfectly possible to think about the action within a conceptual framework in which its self-determination is *oriented* by rational principles, which would confer rationality to the actions it determines. However, its mode of operation is such that it assumes at the same time the contingency of self-determination and the contingency of the actions performed. In this sense, the way we regulate our actions cannot make them *necessary*. Within some contexts, this principle is designated by the expressions 'volition,' 'free volition,' or 'free will,' the last being the expression Spinoza uses as he criticizes the concept, claiming it is based on an illusion.²¹

The use of the expression "*ab placito humanum*" to characterize the source of the second type of law therefore creates a strong tension in Spinoza's theory of action.²² Human decision, as a

20 In reality, it was the introduction of the first type of law that caused many reactions among his contemporaries. Thus, the problem dealt with here was the subject of debate among different interlocutors, although from a perspective contrary to the one adopted here (which problematizes the second type of law). See the epistolary exchange of the philosopher with Willem van Blijenbergh (Ep 18 to 24 and 27/G IV 78–157 and 160–161), with Jacob Osten (intermediating the position of Lambert van Velthuysen; Ep 42 and 43/G IV 207–226) and with Henry Oldenburg during late 1675 and early 1676 (Ep 71, 73 to 75, 77 to 79/G IV 304, 306–316a, 324–330).

21 See in particular, the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics* (G II 204), Ep 22 to Blijenbergh (G IV 134), Ep 58 to Schuler (G IV 265), among others.

22 It should be noted that this use should be thought of as associated with the use of expressions semantically close to others related to the concept of free will in this and other works, such as '*ex beneplacito*,' '*ad libitum*,' '*ex arbitrio*.' True, these expressions are frequently used to express theses that Spinoza will criticize or to express something in a way that the *vulgus* will understand. Nonetheless, they appear also in phrases expressing the author's own theses: TIE 19, 72 and 89/G II 10, 22 and 36; E4p37s1/G II 236–237; TTP 5.29–30/G III 74–76; TTP 7.1/G III 176; TTP 17.30–31 and 103/G III 216 and 219; TTP 20.17 and 21/G III 242; TP 4.3/G IV 52; Ep 12 to L. Meyer (G IV 55).

principle of the regularity of our actions, characterized as different from our nature's necessity, resurfaces in the TTP. Here it is no longer an object of criticism but apparently treated in a positive way, as explaining a central element of the political philosophy exposed in this work, namely, the human laws in a non-civil context. It is not a matter of questioning the different translations of this expression, which are all correct from the perspective of the languages involved, but of asking about the meaning they can have within the framework of a necessitarian and naturalistic philosophy which, *prima facie*, should refuse any and all explanatory functions to the concepts of decision, deliberation or choice.

Thus, the text is open for us to examine Spinoza's precise understanding of *ab placito humanum* and the semantic field to which it is associated. The text invites us to investigate whether the type of law that originates it does not allow us to understand a little better, within the specific framework of the political philosophy presented in the TTP,²³ the foundation and role of normative laws (that is, of prescriptions about what or how things *must* or *should be* rather than declarative statements about what or how things (necessarily) *are* or (necessarily) *occur*, which is the function of the first type of law).²⁴

3 Analysis of Paragraphs 1 and 2

The first four paragraphs of Chapter IV are brief but conceptually quite complex. Their main purpose is to provide the parameters that will serve as the basis for the proof of the chapter's main thesis: viz., that the true law of God (divine law) is not a command, a commandment instituted by God as the Supreme Lawgiver, but a rule of life that guides our actions toward the true knowledge of God and toward the love of God, which constitute the supreme good (TTP 4.9/G III 59).²⁵

The chapter opens with the elucidation of the meaning of the term '*lex*,' by virtue of which an individual or several individuals of the same type act (all) in the same way ("*eademque certa ac determinata ratione agunt*"). It is a nominal definition of the term *considered in an absolute way*, that is, in abstraction of any other relevant specification that may affect its meaning.²⁶ This nominal

23 Note that this article is limited to the analysis of the political and legal spheres, and does not address possible repercussions for ethics. I assume here that the question about the normative or non-normative character of Spinoza's ethics does not necessarily affect the analysis of this question in the legal sphere. A preliminary argument in favor of the plausibility of this separation lies in the difference in treatment of the concepts of sin (whose validity is refused by Spinoza's ethics) and disobedience/crime (whose validity, however re-signified, cannot be refused in the legal-political context).

24 It should also be noted that this article is limited to the analysis of these issues within the framework of the TTP, which clearly adopts a *contractualist* concept of the origin of the Republic, albeit a peculiar version compared to the other contractualist positions of the period. The relationship between the political philosophy discussed there and the one presented in the *Political Treatise* will be put aside and addressed later on.

25 Regarding the specific function of the chapter within the general structure of the TTP, see Preface: "to know whether Scripture implies that the human intellect is corrupt by nature, I wanted to ask [in Chs. 4 and 5] whether universal Religion, or the divine law revealed to the whole human race through the Prophets and Apostles, was anything other than what the natural light also teaches?" (TTP pref.23/G III 10).

26 In this case, the customary use of the term will be responsible for defining the concept of law: "But since the word law seems to be applied figuratively to natural things" (TTP 4.5/G III 58).

definition can be considered as an operative definition that serves as the starting point of the analysis.
27

The paragraph goes on to introduce a first distinction between two types of principles of regularity in the action of individuals, principles that are distinguished by *their origin*. The first principle of regularity depends on the *necessity* of nature to the extent that it *follows* [*sequitur*] from the very essence or definition of a thing. The second principle depends on *ab placito humanum*, *prescribed* by humans to themselves and/or others with a *view to an end*, whatever it may be.²⁸

This distinction has a retrospective impact on the meaning of the nominal definition of ‘law.’ It is certain that both types of principles can be appropriately designated as *principles regulating the action of individual(s)*, and therefore can be univocally designated by the term ‘law’ as defined. However, there is a set of differences between them suggesting the *equivocal* use of the term.²⁹ To begin with, they are distinguished according to their origins; the first depends on the necessity of nature, while the second depends on *ab placito humanum*. And concerning their scopes, the first type regulates *everything* which follows from the essence of *any and all* individuals, whereas the second applies exclusively to human beings and their actions.

From the modal point of view, only regulation by the first principle, and not by the second, implies the *necessity* of the regular character of the actions; in this regard, this regulation is entirely compatible with Spinoza’s refusal of all contingency in reality (E1p33/G II 73). In fact, it is this first type of law that Spinoza uses to construct the concept of natural law (TTP 16.2–10/G III 189–191) and to deconstruct the normative vision of the law of God (TTP 4.9/G III 59). Nothing is said about this in regard to the second type of law, but by being characterized as a *prescription*, we are allowed to assume that it does not imply the *necessity* of the regular character of the actions.

Concerning the logical structure of the sentences that express them, we should take into account that the first kind of principle regulates our actions insofar as it necessarily follows from our nature, *whereas the second regulates our actions insofar as it is* prescribed to us as a means to an end. A universal and necessary affirmative causal declarative sentence that describes the pattern of our actions that fall under its purview should thus be used to express the first type. The truth of this description is founded on the fact that this principle, because it is derived from our nature, *constitutes* the regularity of actions within its purview.

The second type must be expressed by a sentence that not only conveys relationships between means and ends, but that takes the form of a *prescription*. Relationships between means and ends can be expressed by sentences of the same logical type as those of the first type of law. And they

27 It should be recognized, however, that this lexical clarification is not complete, as it does not yet exclude different interpretations of how the law relates to the pattern of the actions of individuals: it may be (a) a rule that *describes* the regularity of certain actions of this (these) individual(s), (b) a rule that *confers* (intrinsic—b’, or extrinsically—b’’) regularity to certain actions, or (c) a rule that *constitutes* the regularity of certain actions. The last meaning is inspired by the concept of the practical conception of rule (Rawls, 1955, p. 24 ff.), which constitutes the regularity of certain actions when defining *practices*, and the concept of *constitutive rule* (Searle, *Speech Acts*, 33ff.), which constitutes the regularity of certain actions in the sense that these actions are not *logically* independent of the rule.

28 Although Spinoza explicitly mentions the purpose of achieving a more comfortable and secure life, he also makes it clear that this is only one of the possible ends figuring in this type of principle.

29 Spinoza suggests that we call this second type of principle by the term ‘*jus*’ and not ‘*lex*’ (TTP 4.1/G III 57), although he himself does not follow his own suggestion in that chapter.

are sometimes so expressed, for example in the explanations of the usefulness of the covenant for security and the good life we find in §§12 to 114 of Chapter XVI.³⁰ But in this case, these statements, in explaining the pact by unintended principles, are only providing a theoretical explanation pointing to the *rationality* of the decision. If this were, in fact, the logical form of the laws of the second type, they could be reduced to a subset of the first type of law, and the creation of the republic could then be interpreted as an entirely unintentional process. However, Spinoza explicitly characterizes the second type of law in terms of *prescriptions*, and these can only regulate the actions of individuals to the extent that they are represented in thought by these individuals, which is not the case with the first type of law.

Prescriptions can be expressed either in the form of a finished *imperative* statement or in the form of a finished statement that includes some deontic expression (e.g., ‘must,’ ‘is allowed,’ ‘is prohibited’). In the first case, we would have something like: *Do m to get f*; in the second, *m must be done in order to get f* (or *You must do m to get f*). In either case, the designated end may be interpreted as a *part* of the foundation (i.e., motivation or reason) for the action to be performed.³¹

From the standpoint of how they regulate actions, do these two types of laws also differ? The former expresses a causal relationship of determination, which operates even if the agent does not represent the principle of regularity to themselves. The second, although it takes the logical form of a prescription that must be represented in thought to an agent for it to effectively regulate actions, could, in principle, be thought of as operating causally. The explanation of its effectiveness on our actions, given the impossibility of resorting to the theory of free will mentioned above, could refer to a form of intrinsic final cause yet to be specified. This interpretation, however, is not in accordance with what is defended in the preface of the fourth part of the *Ethics*, where we read that final causes are only the representation of the result of an action that acts upon us as an efficient cause (E4Pref/G II 375–376).

For this reason, I argue that the second type of law operates in a totally different way to the first, requiring that the individual not only represent to themselves the end sought after, but also the principle that will lead him to this end. It operates intentionally and therefore should not be *descriptive* or reduced to one or more descriptive statements, but rather should take the form of a *prescriptive* statement. It seems, therefore, to be this second type of law that Spinoza refers to so much in §5 of Chapter IV:

commonly nothing is understood by law but a command [*mandatum*] which men can either carry out or neglect [*perficere, & negligere possunt*]*—*since law confines human power under certain limits, beyond which power extends, and does not command anything

30 Consider, for example, the following: “Also (as we showed in Ch. 5 [§§18–20]), if we consider that without mutual aid men *must* live most wretchedly and without any cultivation of reason, we shall see very clearly that *to live*, not only securely, but very well, men *had to* agree in having one purpose” (G III 191; my emphasis); “Nevertheless, they would have tried this in vain if they wanted to follow only what appetite urges (...) So they *had to* make a very firm resolution and contract to direct everything only according to the dictate of reason” (*idem*; emphasis added).

31 I state that the end is part of the foundation because it must yet be considered that it must be wanted or desired and that obtaining it is the object of a decision. All these conditions and the relationships they maintain with each other are quite complex and are being intentionally set aside here.

beyond human powers—for that reason Law seems to *need to be defined more particularly*: that it is a principle of living man prescribes to himself or to others for some end. (G III 58; emphasis added).

‘Law’ would thus designate the second type of regulatory principle of action: it is a principle of life that has the form of a command prescribed to humans, which they *may or may not* follow, to perform certain actions and not others, having in its scope only the actions that *can* be performed by them.

However, up to this point in Chapter IV, it is still possible to assume that the second type of principle (*jus*) was formulated solely to create arguments contrary to positions that defend the normativity of the regulatory principles of our actions, particularly divine laws and decrees, and should not be integrated into a particularly Spinozian concept of law. Indeed, later in Chapter IV, in §§26 and 27, Spinoza states that if God had told Adam that he did not want him to eat of the tree of knowledge, that is, if this were a divine law, that is, a law of the first type, it would have been impossible for Adam to perform this action (“*contradictionem implicaret, Adamum de illa arbore posse comedere*”; G III 63). For if God had so decreed it, either the essence of Adam would be such that he could not eat of the tree of knowledge, or external causes would necessarily have prevented him from doing so. Because the Scriptures report that the action was performed, we must understand this account differently: what God said to Adam was not a law of the first kind, nor was it a law of the second kind (it was not a *prescription*), as Adam realized. By reason of a defect in his knowledge, Adam took what was said to him as a law of the second kind: “as something instituted, which profit or loss follows [*institutum, quod lucrum aut damnum sequitur*]³², not from the necessity and nature of the action performed, but solely from the pleasure and absolute command of some Prince [*ex solo libitu & absoluto imperio alicujus Principis*]” (G III 63).

Laws of the second type, though they have become the principal referent of the term ‘law,’ are characterized as an imperfect perception, at least in the case of divine laws. This suggests that *all* of them are so, whether or not they are related to the way we perceive divine or natural laws. It also suggests that this imperfection can be corrected in all cases of normative laws. However, it might still be too soon to draw these conclusions.

It is noteworthy, moreover, that what Adam interpreted as a law of the second type, that is, as an order to be obeyed under penalty of punishment, is seen by Spinoza as an eternal and necessary truth that implies neither the necessity nor impossibility of performance: “we must say that God only revealed to Adam the evil which would necessarily befall him *if* he ate of that tree, but not the necessity of that evil’s following” (TTP 4.26/G III 63; emphasis added). This eternal and necessary truth is a conditional proposition that associates, in a necessary and eternal way, the performance of an action to its consequence, without requiring the actual performance of the action or the actual occurrence of the consequence. The realization of the first action, at least, remains, under this reading, *not necessary*. Although all actions are necessarily causally determined by God, it does not follow that each, taken individually, is actually necessary.

If Spinoza did not want to incorporate in his notion of law laws that have a normative configuration, he could have explicitly denounced them as reduceable to laws of the first type,

32 In this passage, two other characteristics of normative laws are added to the second type of law: they are instituted by the authority of a sovereign and are accompanied by promises of rewards or punishments.

recovering the univocity of the term ‘*lex*,’ or given them the same treatment given to the notion of free will in *Ethics* (especially in the appendix of the first part). As seen in the case of Adam just discussed, this second type of law could be used only to explain the way in which principles of the first type and the actions they determine are perceived inappropriately (or even falsely) by the imagination of individuals who act.

However, the text goes on to present evidence in favor of my hypothesis by giving an example of the second type of law: “But [the law] that men should yield, or be compelled to yield, the right [*jure*] they have from nature, and bind themselves [*sese adstringant*] to a fixed way of living, depends on a human decision [*ex placito hominum*]” (TTP 4.2/G III 58). This example is not a hypothetical one; it expresses a fundamental thesis of the Spinozian theory on the formation of the republic (TTP 16.12–22/G III 191–194).³³ Thus, in spite of the possible future abandonment of this explanation of contractual content in the *Political Treatise*, it must be recognized that this second type of law plays a role in Spinoza’s more general argument within the specific context of the TTP. This example, in itself, requires us to suppose that Spinoza’s political theory uses normative principles to account for at least some human actions.³⁴ I will consider here, however, the hypothesis that this thesis applies exclusively to the legal-political scope, that is, to the rules of Law (*Jura*).

The compatibility problem of this recognition and necessitarianism does not go unnoticed by Spinoza. In subsequent paragraphs (§§3 and 4), he goes on to explain why he states that the regularity of some of our actions originates *ab placito humanum*, despite also stating “without reservation, that everything is determined by the universal laws of nature to exist and produce effects in a fixed and determinate way” (G III 58).

Spinoza then abandons the semantic register and turns to issues of conceptual and doctrinal order.

4 Analysis of Paragraph 3

I will now analyze the two arguments that Spinoza offers in favor of his position (“I have two reasons for saying that laws of this second kind depend on a decision of men”). The first (§3) explains the relationships between depending *ab placito humanum* and depending on our power, because the first *authorizes* us to enact/sanction principles of action that, according to our hypothesis, have binding or normative power. The second (§4) clarifies the reasons why the imperfect epistemic circumstances in which these laws are produced do not effectively (and not only apparently) jeopardize the normative power of these rules.

33 It should be noted that later in the chapter, in §§9 to 15, the concept of divine law is defined in terms of the second type of law: “Since, therefore, Law is nothing but a principle of living which men prescribe to themselves or to others for some end, it seems that Law must be distinguished into human and divine. [...] We can call the means required by this end of all human actions—i.e., God, insofar as his idea is in us—God’s *commands*, because God himself, insofar as he exists in our mind, *prescribes them to us*, as it were. So the principle of living which aims at this end is quite properly called a Divine law.” (G III 59–60).

34 For other examples corroborating this statement, cf. Otto Pfersmann, “Law’s Normativity in Spinoza’s Naturalism,” *Cardozo Law Review* 25, (2003): 643–656, 649–651. URL: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/cdozo25&i=659>.

The argument of (§3) involves two steps. The first consists in showing why we can conceive of a legitimate source of regulatory principles (of the second type) that is *different* from our nature. Its structure is quite recurrent in Spinoza's arguments: from the thesis that we are part of nature, he concludes that our *potentia* is part of nature's *potentia*, and that, therefore, "the things which follow from the necessity of human nature—i.e., from nature itself insofar as we conceive it to be determined through human nature—still follow, even though by *necessity*, from human power" (G III 58). This argument seems out of place: he begins by explaining that some of our actions depend on *ab placito humanum* because we are allowed to say that from our *potentia* certain things necessarily follow, since our *potentia* is part of the power of nature. It seems to be an argument that reduces the second type of law to the first type: the actions that depend on *ab placito humanum* in fact follow *necessarily* from our power/nature.

However, this is only the first step of a larger argument, and I suggest that its function is to establish, first, *that* we are allowed to consider laws of the second type as *depending* on us, and moreover, that *we* are its authors (rather than the *whole* of nature). Second, this step gives the reasons why Spinoza states that laws of the second type can only have within their scope actions that are in our power to perform. Third, it is possible to infer from this step that, regardless of the meaning and source of the normative value of the second type of law, this normativity must be rooted in Spinoza's naturalistic tenets. Finally, it serves to determine that, whatever the nature of what is referred to by the expression *ab placito humanum*, it cannot be a principle of action that operates in a *random* manner but must be that which *effectively* (and not just illusorily) regulates our actions in line with the necessary relationship those actions maintain with our nature.

If the first step of the explanation suggests the reduction of the second type of law to the first by signaling its relationship with the concept of human *potentia*, the second step explains in what sense this reduction cannot be done. Yet, Spinoza curiously suggests that the first step ("That's why") allows us to "say quite properly that the enactment [*sanctionem*] of those laws depends on a decision of men."³⁵ Now, we have seen that the first step does not seem to allow this conclusion unless one takes 'human decision' to mean the same as human power. The previous step of the argument allows us to conclude that all our actions derive from the necessity of our power, but the conclusion that Spinoza intends to draw from this does not deal with this dependence, but rather another one: the second type of law depends on human decision to be sanctioned. Human decision is the act by which certain prescriptive statements become *laws* acquiring *binding force*. What is at stake in the introduction of the second type of law is not the material determination or content of these finalized principles of action, but its formal determination as *norma* or law (*jus*), which legitimizes the constitutive demand for obedience and accompanying promises of punishment and reward. In this sense, the second step makes it clear that the dependence of the laws of the second

35 '*Sanctio*' or '*sancio*' is a term whose religious origin—consecrate—is brought to the legal vocabulary by Cicero and it designates both the promulgation of a law, and the punishments (*sanctions*) corresponding to disobedience to the law. This term and its variants occur with legal significance in passages referring to divine laws (CM 9/G I 267; E1p33s2/G II 74–76; TTP 6/G III 85) and in passages referring to human laws (TTP 6/G III 61–62; and TTP 5/G III 69–80). However, TTP 16.14 and TTP 17.14 contain a related term, 'ratify' or 'validate', the occurrence of which must be noted: "*Qua autem ratione pactum hoc iniri debeat, ut ratum fixumque sit, hic jam videndum*" (G III 191; emphasis added); "*Deinde ut pactum ratum fixumque esset, & absque fraudis suspicione*" (G III 205–206; emphasis added).

type on human decision is that their normative force depends on the *authority* of this aspect of our power.

The text goes on to clarify what this aspect is and in what sense it must be distinguished from our power. The laws of the second type do not derive from the necessity of our nature/power because they depend

Mainly [*praecipue*] on the power of the *human mind*, but in such a way that the human mind, insofar as it perceives things as either true or false [*res sub ratione veri, & falsi*], can be conceived quite clearly without these laws [that depend on a human decision], although it cannot be conceived without a necessary law, as we have just defined it. (G III 58; emphasis added)

A first distinction regarding the laws of the first type has it that the *ab placito humanum* dependence designates principally (*praecipue*) the power of our *mind* and not *human* power. This first distinction, however, only approximates the meaning of the expression to the concept of human *will*, as defined in E3p9s/G II 147–148. However, it is the second distinction that is the more important (but is, as far as I know, overlooked in scholarly discussions). This second distinction explains the significant difference between and irreducibility of the two types of law, as well as the difference of their *modi operandi*. The key here is that we can conceive the power of our mind in at least two ways: insofar as it perceives things *sub ratione veri & falsi*, and insofar as it does not.

The normative laws, like the first type of laws, are founded in our natural rights and in the *potentia* of our minds. However, unlike the first type of laws, the normative laws do not necessarily follow from our power of thought *as long as* this power is conceived as a power of knowing.³⁶ For if we only regard our mind as a knowing power, we can deny the connection between these laws and our mind's *potentia* without destroying the adequate knowledge we have of our mind. The truth value of the ideas contained in these prescriptions is irrelevant in explaining the *binding force* of these laws.

This restrictive condition allows us to conclude that, *in that specific sense*, the laws of the second kind depend for their being *sanctioned* on a source other than the necessity of our mind's *potentia*: that is, on our decision or will. We see that it does not reintroduce free will as Descartes understood it, but rather begins to re-signify the concept of human will as our own power, since it is considered an abstraction resulting from perception of *sub ratione veri & falsi* things.

It is the combination of the theses 1) that our power is part of the power of nature, which underpins our natural right and authority, and 2) that there are laws that derive from the nature of our mind in one sense, but not in another, which leads Spinoza to distinguish between laws of the first type, which need not be sanctioned to operate, from laws of the second type, which depend on this act to be prescribed to oneself and to others. It is only when *sanctioned* by human decisions,

36 In the first paragraph of this chapter, Spinoza characterizes the first type of law as “*ex ipsa rei natura sive definitione necessario sequitur*” (emphasis added). In the argument examined here, he does not consider our nature or its definition, but only our nature in its cognitive function. Hence the question of whether or not the concepts of human power of thinking and of human power of knowing are synonymous for Spinoza. For the sake of brevity, I will not discuss this question here.

i.e., formally instituted as such by the natural authority of individuals, that these laws can express genuine duties and rights. And to the extent that they are not related to our nature *sub ratione veri & falsi*, their effectiveness in regulating our actions does not depend on whether they are true or false. Therefore, the naturalistic dimension of the second type of law, as well as all the normative vocabulary that surrounds it, resides in (and therefore depends on) the validity of the distinction introduced.

Keeping the *Ethics* in mind and assuming that the TTP must be fully adapted to the metaphysics expressed in the *Ethics*, when we read the fourth chapter, we conclude that only the first type of law can regulate our actions. Laws of the first type can only follow necessarily from our nature, and so we suppose that since laws of the second type suggest something different, they must be taken as the mere imaginative appearance of the laws of the first type. Their false representation is taken as normative and liable to be disobeyed. However, the distinction between these two ways of considering our mind's *potentia* teaches us that our actions may be ruled by the two types of law and that, therefore, my hypothesis that the second type of law is normative in the sense defined by Spinoza is not incompatible with his text and his arguments so far.³⁷

But if we learn that these laws do *not* follow necessarily from the power of our mind seen in a certain way, we still do not understand what is, positively, its relation to the power of our mind in another way. Our power of thinking is the power of producing ideas from existing things, from non-existent things, but also from variations of their power (of their affections), in addition to thinking about images and *entia rationis*. In most of Spinoza's works, these thoughts are contemplated not only in their representative nature, but, above all, in their cognitive function. We now know that these thoughts can and should be taken into account regardless of this function. It is possible to consider that when we value things, actions, and events, we are precisely adopting this other perspective.

In fact, this assumption is compatible with the non-realist concept of values adopted by Spinoza, who considers them to be signs of the way things affect our power. According to E3p9s and E4p9/G II 216, saying that something is good does not mean assigning a real property to this something or determining its value in relation to a universal objective standard. Evaluative propositions are always relative and expressive: they do not refer to what is valued, but to ourselves (to the configuration of our *ingenium*) according to how we are affected by things or ideas in the specific circumstances in which we find ourselves.³⁸ Relating this dimension of our mind's *potentia* to the second type of law would explain why Spinoza is capable of asserting that our power of thinking can be clearly conceived in its cognitive function without it being necessary to include any consideration of these laws.

Nonetheless, some points still need to be elucidated. First, because what is prescribed must be represented in order to be carried out, the cognitive dimension of the thoughts involved in these

37 It remains to be seen whether these two types of law work exclusively or complementarily in explaining the foundations and functioning of the republic, which only a more detailed analysis of chapters 5, 16 and 17 can clarify. Unfortunately, this is a task for another day.

38 Spinoza's philosophy would thus be a variant of the expressive concept of value judgments and the normativity of the laws of the second type. And it avoids moral relativism by determining a model of rational human being in relation to which the duality of good/evil can be defined in terms of useful/useless, beneficial/harmful (E4pref/G II 205–209).

prescriptions should be relevant in explaining their *effectiveness*. Furthermore, the realization of the actions included in its scope is determined not only by the necessity of nature as expressed by the nature of our mind, but also by the causal series of finite causes (E1p28). In this sense, Spinoza's explanation about the sense in which the second type of law can be said to be a legitimately sanctioned law in the legal sense is still incomplete, because it does not explain how it is consistent with the metaphysics of the *Ethics*. Finally, assuming we have the authority to sanction because we are part of nature's authority, this partiality pervades all of our actions, whether of the first or second type of law.

5 Analysis of Paragraph 4

Spinoza's explanation is not complete yet. The second argument (§4) fills in the unresolved issues just mentioned:

Second, I have also said that these laws depend on a human decision [*ex placito hominum pendere*] because we ought to define and explain things through their proximate causes. That universal consideration concerning fate and the connection of causes [*in fact, & concatenation and causaum*] cannot help us to form and order our thoughts concerning particular things.

Furthermore, we are completely ignorant of the order and connection of things themselves, i.e., of how things are really ordered and connected. So for practical purposes [*ad usum vitae*] it is better, indeed necessary, to consider things as possible [*melius, imo necesse est, res ut possibiles considerare*].

Once again, Spinoza develops his argument in two stages, one resorting to a methodological thesis, and the other to an epistemological one. First, he goes back to the thesis that we must explain things [particular things or events] by their proximate causes and that this is why we can rightly say that the laws of the second type depend on *ab placito humanum*, without having to cite the other causes of the infinite series of finite causes.³⁹ Note that the referent of this expression, human decision, is considered here as designating the *proximate* cause of the second type of law, and not its *initiating* cause, as would be the case concerning the explanations of human decisions that refer to the concept of free will as an absolute power to self-determination. The first justification for considering us to be the authors of our actions, even though we are not their primary cause, is of a *methodological* order. Therefore, it also depends on an epistemic justification, because this requirement ("we ought to") must rest on the characteristics of the epistemic context to which it must be applied, at the risk of being considered arbitrary.

39 This thesis is compatible with the infinite chain of finite causes demonstrated in E1p28/G II 69, responsible for the existence and operation of finite things existing in duration, as well as with its scopes, where it is stated that God is the remote *cause*—and not the proximate cause—to singular things. See also E4app, I/G II 266. However, the introduction of the concept of proximate cause in this context does not fail to raise the difficult problem of the individualization of agents, since this is not absolute, but relative (see E2d2/G II 84 and E2p13def).

The rest of the argument presents just this justification, proposing something that had not been defended so clearly until then. The first reason asserts that not even true knowledge of the whole of everything that occurs taken collectively (“universal consideration concerning fate”) or of the causes of nature taken distributively (“*concatenatione causarum*”) can help us form and order—i.e., regulate—our thoughts concerning particular things in the use of life. But what if we could attain true knowledge of the order and connection of particular things and their effects by the third kind of knowledge? Should this not help us regulate our actions in circumstances that demand laws of the second type and, therefore, undo the normative appearance of these laws?

The second reason eliminates this possibility by asserting that we completely [*plane ignoremos*], insurmountably ignore the order and connection of particular things. Even though we *universally* know *that* they are ordered and *that* they necessarily interconnect in an infinite chain of finite causes (E1p28), and *that* the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things (E2p7, c and s), “we are completely ignorant of [...] how things are really ordered and connected.” In this context, where we are unable to know the necessary relation of human laws to the laws of nature, Spinoza concludes that it is not only pragmatically better (for otherwise we could not act in certain circumstances), but indeed also *necessary* (“*melius, imo necesse est, res ut possibles considerare*”) to consider things and actions as *possible*.

But what does the term ‘necessary’ mean in this passage? Let us consider the nominal definitions of possible thing and contingent thing that were introduced at the beginning of the fourth part of the *Ethics*:

I call singular things contingent insofar as we find nothing, while we attend only to their essence, which necessarily posits their existence or which necessarily excludes it. (E4d3/G II 209)

I call the same singular things possible, insofar as, while we attend to the causes from which they must be produced, we do not know whether those causes are determined to produce them. (E4d4/G II 209)

Although Spinoza had already clarified in what sense *we can* appropriately say that particular/singular things are contingent or possible and the meaning of these terms (E4d3 and d4), he had admitted, however, that these terms do not correspond to anything in reality (E1p33 and scholia).⁴⁰ We saw that the analysis of Adam’s case led us to recognize, in the TTP, that the necessity of the connection between an action and its consequence does not necessitate the performance of the action. We learn, therefore, the context in which *we must* use these definitions for the uses of life (which includes legal and political uses).

These definitions are not incompatible with Spinoza’s necessitarian determinism or his naturalism. On the contrary: they *rest* on it. There is nothing *in re* that is possible and/or contingent, but there is *in re* that which exists solely in function of its cause (modes) and that which depends on that cause being determined to produce its own existence. Therefore, to represent something as

40 For an examination of the use of these terms and their importance for politics in Spinoza’s text, as well as a defense different from what I present here, see Homero Santiago, “Por uma teoria spinozana do possível,” *Conatus: filosofia de Spinoza* 5, no. 9 (2011): 41–48. URL: [Dialnet-PorUmaTeoriaEspinosaDoPossivel-3718042.pdf](http://dialnet-poruma.teoriaespinosana.do.possivel-3718042.pdf).

possible or contingent is not to have a false representation of that thing, provided that those terms are taken in the sense of E4d3 and d4. Sure, they express the stage of my knowledge about the existence of this thing, but they also express something about its existence and the way it is determined by the necessity of nature.

Thus, the scope of the terms ‘possible’ and ‘contingent’ does have a double focus on the existence of the thing

Saying that *one thing is possible* is to say that (a) *I know what this thing (its essence) is, but I do not know if it exists or not*; and (b) *its existence does not follow from/is not involved in its essence, and it is hence dependent on being caused by other existing things*.

Saying that *one thing is contingent* is equivalent to saying that (a) *I know which are the causes of the existence of this thing, but I do not know if these causes are determined to cause this existence*; and (b), *its existence not only depends on other existing things to be produced, but also that these things are determined to produce it*.

What these definitions teach us when applied to the epistemic context described by Spinoza in this second argument is that we *can only consider* the essences of things, events, and actions *by abstracting* from what causes their existence and what determines their occurrence. This is because the knowledge to not consider them this way and to take them as necessary is necessarily *beyond our reach*. All the actions we perform or think about performing can only be thought of by us as being *possible* and *contingent*, since we do not consider (because we cannot consider *comme il faut*) ourselves or the things outside of us as necessarily including these existences or excluding them, nor do we consider (because we cannot consider *comme il faut*) their causes as determined, or not, when producing them.

The epistemic context in which these definitions are applied is *necessary* for us. Therefore, it is not only more practical to consider particular things as possible and contingent: this is how we *effectively* (because necessarily) represent them within the scope of action. From God’s perspective, laws of the second type apply to things and actions that are causally determined by the necessity of nature. Still, the second type of law is said to originate from human decision because *intentional* regulation of things (i.e., that which depends on the representation of a principle of regularity) is necessarily (and not only pragmatically recommended to be) represented by us as being applicable to things or events that are necessarily represented by us as not necessary. However, the imperfect character of this knowledge does not affect the effectiveness of these laws precisely because their relationship with our nature does not go through the cognitive dimension of thinking.

6 Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated here that a careful analysis of the first four paragraphs of Chapter 4 of the TTP helps us to better understand Spinoza’s legal naturalism. These paragraphs provide good reasons for claiming that his theory conceives human law as being intrinsically normative, rooted in what he calls “*placito humanum*,” which refers to an aspect of our own natural right that is rooted in a feature of our own power of thinking that is not intended to fulfill a cognitive function. Because

it is not necessarily connected with our power of thinking quatenus a power of knowing, it can be a source of laws that do not follow from the necessity of our nature (power of thinking tout court), i.e., the source of normative laws. Because it is an aspect of our natural right, it institutes us as legitimate authorities and makes us responsible (and liable) for sanctioning rules of life that are intrinsically normative, being that this is the authority at stake in the covenant that founds the Republic. It explains the authority that is transferred to everyone in the covenant and is, therefore, the principle underlying obligations, prohibitions, and permissions in the civil sphere.

The laws of the second type depend on human decision not only because they must be *sanctioned* by the authority that natural law (i.e., law of the first kind) confers on each one of us, but also because some of our actions—even if determined by the necessity of our nature—depend on being represented to be regulated. The rationale behind why Spinoza's naturalism can coexist with the second type of law (normative prescriptions) is that it asserts that both these actions and the law that regulate them are grounded in our nature/*potentia*. But if this regulation by representation depended on the knowledge of such rooting, it could never occur. Even if the correct explanation of things presupposes only the knowledge of the proximate causes, our actions and their regulation do not have only our decision as the proximate cause; therefore, knowledge of this rooting still depends on the true representation of the infinite series of causes that is entirely and definitively beyond our grasp. Conversely, the perception of what is good or bad, useful or harmful is accessible to everyone because they are expressions of how things in the world affect our power to act and think. In this case, the truth value of the propositions that express these perceptions is irrelevant to their regulatory function.

Even if there is rationality in the laws of the second type that allows them to be understood and obeyed by those who follow the dictates of reason, it is not this rationality that explains their normativity, but individuals' perceptions that what they order is possible for them (it is something they can do), may or may not occur (they are obliged to do, but it is not necessary that they do), and is useful/good for them to do, and thus to obey them *by themselves* is *to themselves*. Hence, although all our actions are causally determined, it is possible to say that the relationships between the normative laws and the actions they regulate are not causal, but only logical in the precise sense in which the actions are explained by their usefulness (whether or not truly perceived by the agent) but not by their necessity.

These imperfect epistemic conditions do not in any way compromise the normativity of these laws because they are conditions from which we cannot escape and are *constitutive* of the circumstances in which the laws of the second type are necessary for human beings.

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Althusser's Spinozism: A Philosophy for the Future?

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1 Reading Capital

The 'second' Spinoza-Renaissance generally refers to 1960s France, where a small group of scholars—Gueroult,¹ Matheron,² and Deleuze³ among them—advanced a new image of Spinoza that broke with the then still widely dominant one developed by Hegel and his students and commentators. More attentive reconstructions of this period include Althusser among the Parisian musketeers of Spinozism, if only as a marginal reference. In fact, any effort to identify a text of Althusser's specifically on Spinoza must surely end in disappointment. The works published in his lifetime include only a handful of brief references to Spinoza—none longer than a paragraph. And neither his extensive posthumous work nor his archived writings contain texts dedicated to Spinoza.⁴ An entirely different task was occupying Althusser's time in the sixties: the theoretical renewal of Marxism. It is his later recollection of this task that contains his now famous confession of Spinozism:

- 1 Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza. I. Dieu (Ethique, I)* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969); Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza.II. L'âme (Ethique, II)* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne 1974).
- 2 Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1969).
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1969).
- 4 An exception here is a 1985 work: Louis Althusser, "L'unique tradition matérialiste I Spinoza," *Lignes* 8 (1993):72–119. URL: <https://epdf.tips/lunique-tradition-materialiste.html>. Also relevant are several notes of Althusser's from the end of the 1960s preserved in the IMEC archives bearing the shelf mark ALT2. A32-01.10 - 13 and the *Fiches de Lecture* preserved with the shelf mark ALT2. A60-08 -09, probably dating from the 1950s. In the last few years, three doctoral dissertations have been devoted to Althusser's reading of Spinoza: Juan Domingo Sánchez Estop, *Spinoza dans Althusser: présence et effets du spinozisme dans l'oeuvre de Louis Althusser*, PhD thesis defended at the Université Libre de Bruxelles on 02-14-2020; Esteban Dominguez, *De una pasión fuerte y comprometedora. Estudio sobre los orígenes del spinozismo de Louis Althusser*, PhD thesis defended at the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes on 06-02-2021; and Jean Matthys, *Althusser et Spinoza. Genèse et enjeux d'une ético-politique de la théorie*, PhD thesis defended at the Université catholique de Louvain, 09-08-2021.

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"If we were not structuralists, we can now confess why [...] we were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion: we were *Spinozists*."⁵ The 'we' here refers to the authors of *Reading Capital*, some of whom are among the most prominent contemporary Spinoza scholars—think only of Balibar and Macherey. But the 'we' also proved to be prescriptive, functioning as a kind of injunction to Spinozism heeded by successive generations of Althusserians, including first-rate commentators like Moreau,⁶ Tosel,⁷ Albiac⁸ and Montag.⁹ This 'Althusserian' Spinozism differs significantly from the Spinozism of Gueroult, Matheron, and Deleuze. It is a Spinozism put into practice well before it is announced, one that can be understood only after a close analysis of Althusser's and his students' rereading of Marx. Direct references to Spinoza are extremely rare and often elliptical. Yet they are also of key strategic importance, for they point to the theoretical innovations Althusser himself develops. These can be summed up in the following three points: a new concept of causality, a critique of a theory of knowledge grounded in the concepts of 'Origin,' 'Subject,' and 'Right,' and, finally, an account of the imagination as the 'opacity of the immediate' (fully developed only in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*). Consequently, the theoretical innovations that Althusser developed, but attributed to Spinoza, provide an entirely new image of Spinozism.

In *The Object of Capital*, a cornerstone of twentieth-century Marxism, Althusser assigns Spinoza a significant place in the history of philosophy: "Spinoza's philosophy marks a theoretical revolution without precedent in the history of philosophy, and likely the greatest philosophical revolution of all time—so much so that we can consider Spinoza Marx's only direct philosophical ancestor."¹⁰ Althusser also draws on this comparison between Spinoza and Marx to explain the suppression of this revolution: "this radical revolution was subjected to enormous historical erasure, and Spinoza's philosophy encountered the same fate as Marx's met and continues to meet in some countries: It served as a slanderous insult and an accusation of 'atheism'."¹¹ Spinozism runs through modernity like an underground river, and it reappears on the surface—in the Spinoza-Renaissance and in German Idealism, for instance—due to "a misunderstanding." What does this powerful philosophical revolution consist in? In the final chapter of *The Object of Capital*, "Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution," Althusser defines the fundamental theoretical problem present in a practical state in Marx's *Capital* in the following way: "what concept or set of concepts will allow us to theorize the way a structure's elements are determined, the structural relations between these elements, and all the effects of these relations on the efficacy of the structure itself? And, *a fortiori*, what

5 Louis Althusser, "Éléments d'autocritique," In Louis Althusser, *La Solitude de Machiavel*, ed. by Yves Sintomer (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 181.

6 Moreau's first book especially is a true *abrégé* of Althusser's Spinozism. Cfr. Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

7 Especially André Tosel, *Spinoza ou le crépuscule de la servitude. Essai sur le "Traité Théologico-Politique,"* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1984).

8 Gabriel Albiac, *La Sinagoga Vacía: Un estudio de las fuentes Marranas del Espinosismo* (Madrid: Hiperión, 1987).

9 Warren Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and his Contemporaries* (London-New York: Verso Books, 1999).

10 Louis Althusser, "L'objet du Capital," in Louis Althusser et al., *Lire le Capital*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 288.

11 *Ibid.*, 288.

concept or set of concepts will allow us to theorize the way a subordinate structure is determined by a dominant one? In other words, how should we define the concept of structural causality?”¹²

Althusser maintains that modern philosophy seems to offer two models to theorize this causality: a mechanistic Cartesian model of transitive and analytic causality (which, however, has difficulty providing an account of the causality of a whole on its parts), and an expressive Leibnizian model that played a central role in Hegel’s philosophy via the syntax of the *pars totalis*. But he also adds: “The only theorist with the unprecedented audacity to delineate this problem and sketch a tentative solution to it was Spinoza. But as we know, history had buried him in the depths of night [*enseveli sous des épaisseurs de nuit*]. It is only through Marx, who, however, did not know him well, that we can begin to catch a glimpse of his trampled-on face.”¹³ Waxing lyrical and interlacing concepts and passion, Althusser establishes a circular movement that gives rise to a ‘new Spinoza:’ it is the problems Marx describes in *Capital* that allow us to grasp, beyond the condemnations and the ‘misunderstandings,’ the solutions Spinoza offers. In other words, only eyes educated by Marx can read and understand Spinoza. Of course, at the heart of Spinoza’s theoretical landscape lies the concept of structural/immanent causality, on which “the effects [are] not external to the structure, nor [are] they an object or an element—a preexistent space on which the structure *would stamp its label*. On the contrary, [...] the structure [is] immanent in its effects, an immanent cause of its effects in the Spinozan sense of the term, [...] *the entire existence of the structure consists in its effects*, that is [...] a structure that is only a particular combination of its effects [it is] nothing other than its effects.”¹⁴

2 Beyond Mechanist and Expressivist Causation

The passages Althusser dedicates to Spinoza in *Reading Capital* are dazzling. They illuminate the night for an instant without, however, following through with a full analysis—with the exception of one brief paragraph in *Éléments d’autocritique (Essays in Self-Criticism)*.¹⁵ It was Althusser’s students who developed these insights in several books: think only of Pierre Macherey’s extraordinary *Hegel or Spinoza*,¹⁶ Pierre-François Moreau’s brief *Spinoza*,¹⁷ Balibar’s work, now collected in *Spinoza Political, The Transindividual*,¹⁸ or Warren Montag’s *Bodies, Masses, Power*.¹⁹

Yet despite the brevity of his remarks, Althusser makes an extremely important claim that sets him apart even from the Spinoza-Renaissance in 1960s France, namely, immanent causation cannot be reduced to either the mechanistic or the expressive model. This point indicates a new path that differs from those taken by the great Spinozist interpretive traditions, as one assigns him to the mechanistic materialism camp while the other, in Hegelian terms, places him at the origin of a

12 Ibid., 401.

13 Ibid., 403.

14 Ibid., 405.

15 Althusser, *Éléments*, 181–189 (§ 4 «Sur Spinoza»).

16 Pierre Macherey, *Hegel ou Spinoza* (Paris: Maspero 1979).

17 Moreau, *Spinoza*.

18 Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza politique: Le transindividuel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018).

19 Montag, *Bodies*.

teleological movement through which substance becomes subject—a fully-fledged transcendental structure of reality in Hegel's sense. The new path is not easy to follow, as it requires reading Spinoza not only as a historical figure whose time has forever passed but also as a theorist who is our contemporary—even one who insinuates himself in the fissures of the present to blow them open. I would call this a “philosophy of the future” if this did not evoke much too facile views of a philosophy of history. We can think it a philosophy of the future in that the materiality of Spinoza's text produces new meanings as it comes into contact with Althusser's insights.

In another striking passage of *Is it Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?* that seems to have the Spinoza-Leibniz alternative as its background, Althusser claims that denying the existence of an ‘origin’ (God) is not sufficient to escape metaphysics:

When we deny the radical origin of things in any form whatsoever, we must forge new categories that differ entirely from the classical ones made to theorize the delegations of origin that are essence, cause, and freedom. When we reject the Origin as the central bank of philosophy, we must also reject its currency and put other categories into circulation.²⁰

These remarks are matched in another wonderful passage from a posthumous text entitled (by a redactor) *The Only Materialist Tradition*. The passage lingers over the details of Spinoza's philosophical strategy:

Even Spinoza's philosophical strategy fascinated me. Jacques Derrida has said much about strategy in philosophy and he is perfectly right, as every philosophy is a device for theoretical combat that, within its strategic objectives and offensives, employs texts as strongholds and outposts to invade theoretical landscapes fortified and occupied by the opponent. And Spinoza began with God! He began with God even though (as I believe with all his worst enemies) he was an atheist (like Costa and many other Portuguese Jews of his time). Supreme strategist that he was, he began by overrunning the chief stronghold of his opponent, or rather he settled into it as if he were himself his own opponent, avoiding suspicion of in fact being the stronghold's sworn opponent, and he rearranged the theoretical fortress so as to turn it inside out, as one might turn cannons against their own occupants. [...] Philosophers don't normally proceed in this way: it is always beginning from a certain *exterior* that they brandish the strength of their views, which are destined to overrun the space guarded and protected by preceding views that already occupy it. Militaristically speaking, this revolutionary philosophical strategy recalls the theory of urban guerrilla warfare, the encirclement of cities from the countryside dear to Mao, or certain forms of Machiavelli's military-political strategy (his theory of fortresses especially). I was fascinated by this unrivaled audacity which gave me the idea of the extreme essence of any philosophical strategy—its confessed

20 Louis Althusser, “Est-il simple d'être marxiste en philosophie?,” *La pensée* 183, no. 5 (1975): 3–31. URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6204366q/f5.item>.

limit-essence that should never be overstepped. In this way, it reminded me of the thinking of a Machiavelli, who always thinks “in the extremes”, “in the limits”.²¹

Combining the two passages allows us to read Spinoza in an entirely new way. It is not a matter of pigeonholing Spinoza into one of the currents of the Western tradition (atheism, pantheism, naturalism, mechanism, organicism, etc.), and even less a matter of imagining him as a hazy exteriority to this tradition (archaicism and orientalism constitute a fully-fledged interpretive tradition of Spinoza). We must strive to grasp the fiery political strategy lying behind the coolness of the *mos geometricus* and, within the political strategy, the theoretical reworking of the most important concepts of this tradition, which in turn produces ethical-political effects of liberation.

3 The Spinoza-Leibniz Alternative

We saw that lying in the background of Althusser’s passage is a key Spinoza-Leibniz alternative. At issue are two different ways of understanding the part-whole relation (which explain Althusser’s greater insistence on this connection than on the Descartes-Spinoza alternative: At stake here is the Marxist concept of totality). This alternative has vanished from the surface of the philosophical tradition inasmuch as, after Leibniz, Spinoza’s theoretical engagement with the issue was simply attributed to Leibniz (Bertrand Russell provides a paradigm example of this), making Leibniz out to be a crypto-Spinozist.²² The dichotomy is all the more interesting since Althusser himself, flirting with structuralism, came close to a Leibnizian reading of immanent causality by explaining it in terms of a formalizable combinatoriality.²³ Reestablishing the dichotomy and understanding how Spinoza’s denial of a radical origin of things led him down a different path than those of theology and metaphysics allows us to fully grasp the risk of capitulating to this Leibnizian reading, and so to keep our distance from it. In this, of course, we go beyond Althusser, but *with* Althusser.

Leibniz’s approach to the question splits being into two levels: the realm of the possible, namely, of non-contradictory essences in the divine intellect, and the realm of the actual, which is an effect of the divine will brought about among all possible worlds and restricted not only by logical impossibility but also by the mystery of impossibility. A possible essence in the divine intellect is constituted by a complete notion, which itself consists in whatever is sufficient to explain all that happens not only to the individual itself but, due to the intra-expressivity of monads, also to the whole world. Thus, once God creates the world—the best among all possible worlds—the complete notion of every individual constitutes the law of the series of a monad’s perceptions (the representation of multiplicity in a unity)—the succession of predicates, i.e., of events, inhering in the subject. The motor of the series is appetite for a successive perception. The world as (well-founded) phenomenon is thus given by the occurrence, within individual monads, of single representations of the world in harmony with one another. This is what makes monads belong to the same world, each of them

21 Althusser, “L’unique tradition matérialiste”, 86–87.

22 Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

23 Vittorio Morfino, “Combinación o conjunción: Althusser entre Leibniz y Spinoza,” in *Spinoza Maledictus: Spinoza Treceavo Coloquio*, eds. Ana Leila Jabase et al. (Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, 2018), 322–335.

constituting one of infinitely many points of view from which it is possible to observe the moment of creation. The spatiotemporal dimension of reality is constituted by the order of the occurrence of predicates in subjects. All simultaneously compossible predicates or events make up space, and all successively compossible predicates make up time. Finally, mind and body possess the same model of lawful order functioning by means of two different kinds of cause: the former by final causes and the latter by efficient causes. Of course, both are already present *a priori* in the complete notion of the individual in the divine intellect, and both develop along a timeline with a determinate orientation—efficient causes from past to present and final causes from future to present.

The key elements of Leibniz's system are, on a logical level, the concepts of subject, predicate, and the law of the series, and, on a metaphysical level, those of monad, event, and once more the law of the series. The concept of causality that binds these elements together is twofold. On the one hand, we have the expressive causality of a monad that, as a part of the whole, reflects in itself the entire universe (one thing expresses another, according to Leibniz, when there is a constant and regular relation between what can be said of one and what can be said of the other).²⁴ On the other hand, we have the transitive causality of the passage within each individual monad from one element of the series to the successive element.

The easily made error of perspective here, Althusser seems to suggest, is that of supposing that Spinoza merely erases, as if by the stroke of a pen, the radical origin of all things (God) while nevertheless retaining all other elements without any change. This is an understandable error considering that Spinoza employs the words of the tradition while radically redefining their meaning with sustained use of oxymorons (God *or* Nature, essence *or* existence, right *or* power, etc.). Without running through all the details of Spinoza's work in deconstructing and reconstructing these key notions, which in fact mirrors the order of the *mos geometricus*, let's observe its main effects.

First of all, Spinoza's insistence that infinite substance is immanent in the finite eliminates the ontological dualism of possibility and actuality. There is only one reality that can be known in different ways (the three kinds of knowledge). The removal of antecedent possible essences also eliminates the sphere of applicability of the law of non-contradiction. There are no essences—that is, complete concepts of individuals that subsist before their worldly existence. Rather, the essence of an individual emerges after the fact—after the individual already exists—from its power of acting and its ability to enter into relations with other individuals. Moreover, an individual is not a fundamental monad to which modifications inhere, but the perseverance of a relationship that is not closed in on itself, but open through the triple relation (that constitutes every individual) of composition, regulated exchange, and of affecting/being affected. Each individual is at the same time composed of and a component of other individuals, enters into regulated interchanges with other individuals and, finally, traces and is traced by other individuals.²⁵ Change within this theoretical framework cannot occur according to the simple model of successive linear states, following an

24 It is worth noting that the term Althusser uses to define the nature of Leibnizian causation, 'expression,' is also at the heart of Deleuze's first reading of Spinoza in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*—a reading from which Deleuze later distanced himself. It seems to me that Deleuze's exaggeration of the importance of the term 'expression' and its cognates in Spinoza, which occur only a handful of times in the *Ethics*, ends up muddling Spinoza's philosophy with Leibniz's. See Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1969).

25 Along the lines of Lorenzo Vinciguerra, *Spinoza et les signes. La genèse de l'imagination* (Paris: Vrin, 2005).

immutable law of the series (in the *Ethics*, Spinoza abandons the term ‘series’ that he uses in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, replacing it with the term *connexio*—interweaving), but must be understood as a complex and stratified relation among durational things.²⁶

Of course, this all hinges on a correct understanding of the nature of modes. If we understand modes via the model of inherence, we must agree with Bayle that we are faced with one of the most bizarre theories the human mind has ever conceived.²⁷ But if we instead take a mode’s being in another way as *reference* to another, as a relational being that cannot be isolated, we will be able to understand its duration in an entirely new way as well.

Similarly, our way of acquiring knowledge can no longer be based on the model of a judgment taking a subject-predicate form but must rather proceed according to a systematic transformation of ideas of the imagination by means of a radical and anti-intuitive use of language made possible by the thesis of the uniqueness of the substance. This is no longer an Aristotelian logic of finite substance but a logic of infinite substance in which, like in Hegel, “Truth is the whole.” However, unlike in Hegel, the whole is not characterized by the simple interiority of a consciousness, but by the structured complexity of an existence that unfolds in the aleatory and material realm of duration, without center or end. Knowledge cannot then be grounded in a judgment that captures the inherence of predicate in subject (an inherence captured by a finite analysis for truths of reason and by an infinite analysis for truths of fact), nor in a representation of object in subject (an idea that animated the impossible dream of a *universal characteristic*), but must rather be grounded in an open system that constructs the object of knowledge through a process of transforming the imagination—based on experience but ultimately against it.

4 From the Concept of Duration to a New Theory of History

Let’s focus now on the concept of duration featured in the theory of modal relationality sketched above. For Spinoza, we cannot speak of a mode’s duration—of its individual rhythm—separately from others, since a thing’s duration cannot be considered a succession of the states of a subject through time. Duration is always a *cum durare*, to use a Lucretian term Spinoza was fond of—a *concurrere*. Within this framework, the term *continuatio* that we find in the definition of duration cannot have the same meaning as it does in Descartes—that is, as a series of discrete and contingent moments sustained and united by divine creation (an entirely different *continuatio* and *concursus*—‘vertical cuts’ made by God). The continuation of duration in Spinoza cannot be understood in terms of a model of linearity and seriality because it is an effect of composition and interchange. Indeed, to rule out any readings of continuation as a kind of continuous creation, Spinoza writes in the fourth postulate of the physical digression that “The human Body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated (*continuo quasi regeneratur*)” (E2post4/G II 102/C I 462). This regeneration does not occur instant to instant, like

26 See Vittorio Morfino, *Il tempo e l’occasione. L’incontro Spinoza Machiavelli* (Milan: LED, 2002), 144–160.

27 “the most monstrous hypothesis imaginable, the most absurd, the most diametrically opposed to evident notions of the mind” Pierre Bayle, “Dictionnaire Historique et Critique,” in Pierre Bayle, *Œuvres diverses*, ed. by Élisabeth Labrousse (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964–1982), 1073.

divine creation, but is rather an 'as it were' regeneration. In other words, the apparent linearity results from a deeper complex of interchanges and interwoven levels whose name, in Spinoza's system, is precisely the *ordo et connexio rerum*. This means that every duration is composed of durations, that it exists in a web of durations and composes durations at a successive level, even if none can be conceived on the basis of persistence. Persistence, which is always relative, is rather the result of this.

Spinoza's deconstruction of seventeenth century metaphysics and theology, then, goes well beyond eliminating God by the stroke of a pen. The concept of an individual as a relational web compels us to reject all forms of simple temporal continuity (unless conceived as effects of complexity). The temporality defined by Spinoza is complex, plural, stratified—a multiverse. Of course, time is relative in Leibniz as much as in Spinoza, in the sense that it consists in a relation. But whereas in Leibniz the temporal relation (which also constitutes the spatial dimension through the determination of simultaneities) is grounded in a substrate, in Spinoza it has no grounding other than in the infinite composition of durations, from the infinitely small to the infinitely large, and is only considered absolute by the imaginative representation of time as indissolubly tied to the speculative pairing of human subject and divine subject—a cornerstone of the prejudice of final causes.

There are no linear series in Spinoza, then, because there are no immaterial atoms to constitute permanence in the infinite succession of events. Instead, all we have are event-effects of a web of relations (the very concept of 'event' must be thought of in a new way within the relationship that Spinoza posits between *individua* and *res singulares*),²⁸ an interweaving of infinite immanent causation and transitive finite causation that shatters the Leibnizian arrow of time that points to an ever-expanding culture in the world (an arrow that provides a model for every successive philosophy of history), making it nothing more than a "human, all too human" representation.

Thus, the initially opaque connection between the structural theory of causation and a theory of history becomes clear. In *Reading Capital*, Althusser claims that Spinoza "was the first in the world to offer both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate [...] as he discovered that the history of men we find in books is not a text written in the pages of a book, that the truth of history cannot be read from its manifest discourse, since the text of history is not one in which a single voice speaks (the *Logos*), but an inaudible and illegible tracing [*l'inaudible et illisible*]

28 Here are the definitions of the two: "By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of Individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing" (E2def7, G II 85/C I 447). "When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body *or* Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies" (E2p13def, G II 99–100/C I 460). What jumps out is that, for both singular things and individuals, unity is an effect of plurality. 'Together' [*simul*] underscores the (temporary) temporal dimension of this unity, while the verbs 'concur' [*concurrere*] and 'compose' [*componere*] both indicate the dynamic dimension that necessarily accompanies it. The difference between the two is one of degree and consists in a repetition of this unity-effect in an individual, yielding a permanence that is nonetheless always relative.

notation] of the effects of a structure of structures.”²⁹ It is precisely in the deconstruction of the solidarity between the uniqueness of time, the book and the author that the fundamental Spinozian gesture at the heart of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* lies. This gesture grounds a new theory of history that rejects all forms of theodicy and, ahead of its time, any philosophy of history that, as Marx used to say, “has the supreme virtue of being supra-historical.”³⁰ At the same time, this gesture makes it possible to grasp the material effects of this solidarity in the discipline imposed on bodies through the prescriptions of the “Book.”³¹ Althusser’s Spinoza and its extension thus reveal all their power as instruments to intervene in our own time: a Spinoza whose radical materialism allows him, on the one hand, to not only enter into dialogue with the most significant developments of the natural and social sciences but most of all resist dominant idealistic (ideological) readings of them, and, on the other hand, to reread the Marxist tradition against the grain and, by doing so, renew its power as a theory. This renewal should not be confused with, but rather enter into, dialogue with the Spinozism that emerged from the tradition of Italian *operaismo*, whose origin is that astonishing ‘prison notebook’ that is Antonio Negri’s *The Savage Anomaly*.³²

Translated from the Italian by Leonardo Moauro

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29 Louis Althusser, “Du Capital à la Philosophie de Marx,” in Louis Althusser et al., *Lire le Capital* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 8.

30 Karl Marx, “À la Rédaction de l’Отечественныя Записки,” in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe*, Erste Abteilung, Bd. 25 (Berlin: Dietz, 1985), 117.

31 This leads to a further aspect of Althusser’s Spinozism that we have had to leave out for reasons of space: the question of ideology theorized between Spinoza and Freud. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. Dan Latimer (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989), 61–102. This is a theme that Michel Pêcheux explores, referring to Spinoza, in Michel Pêcheux, *Les vérités de La Palice. Linguistique, sémantique, philosophie* (Paris: Maspero, 1975).

32 Antonio Negri, *L’anomalia selvaggia. Saggio su potere e potenza in Baruch Spinoza* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982).

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A Metaphysics of Human Life, Towards a New Reading of Spinoza's Philosophy

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Keywords: descriptive metaphysics, human view-point, human life, anthropomorphism, good, bad, temporal existence

A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death. (E4p67/G II 261, lines 1–2)

On a widespread view, Spinoza's metaphysics is a system of principles by means of which all truth about the essences and existence of all beings, including ourselves, is derived. This system, so it is supposed, is more-or-less complete: it represents the universe from the view-point of an omniscient intellect, to the effect that the remedy that the *Ethics* provides against the daily sorrows of human life is an invitation to adopt some kind of divine viewpoint. This is no small promise: once we manage to look at things, in particular our own lives, *sub specie aeternitatis*, we may find peace and quiet.

I must confess, the longer I work on Spinoza the more I find this approach unsatisfying. To be sure, the *Ethics* does contain a conceptual framework that makes this escape from the human perspective a vivid option, although we may materialize it only step by step. Moreover, it does so in a manner that attracts quite different-minded people. I also do not deny that this outlook is important when it comes to comprehending how Spinoza's metaphysics contributes to a better life. Yet I think there is more wisdom and subtlety in Spinoza's metaphysical thought which, however, only comes to the fore if we begin to pay attention to other aspects that are not tied up with the notion of a system offering cognitive escape from the human perspective. My contention is that Spinoza's metaphysics is also concerned with the many ways in which the human perspective shapes our lives. Spinoza gives us an understanding of human life as it may be derived from the notion of our having our very own viewpoint on the things and aims in our life. To appreciate the value of Spinoza's system, it is not sufficient to reconstruct it in terms of a few guiding principles; we must also show how it accounts for the reality of our human, irreducibly situated, historically embedded life.

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My suggestion is that we can read Spinoza's metaphysics, including his metaethics, as a metaphysics of life, or rather as a metaphysics of humans. This implies that there is much of a descriptive metaphysics entailed in Spinoza's ontology. I will show this in some detail in the next section. Now one might rightly say that the focus on Spinoza's ideas of our embedded, finite, or *human* life is not new;¹ it is also easily corroborated by textual evidence. Most significant in this regard is E4p67, where he writes that for the free man wisdom is a matter of reflecting on life (G II 261, lines 1–2). If this statement entails a description of his own philosophical aspiration, we may infer that far from being a subordinate concern, reflection on life—and specifically *human* life—is at the center of philosophical reflection for Spinoza.

This being said, to understand precisely how Spinoza's interest in human life is reflected in his philosophy, it is not sufficient to reconstruct his views on the psychological, social or political aspects of the human life form. In this case, we cannot restrict ourselves to a discussion of those parts of his philosophical system that are immediately about practical issues, such as his psychology, political theory, and moral philosophy. What is required instead is a closer inquiry into the ways in which Spinoza's system in general, as well as his metaphysics in particular, are concerned with human life; otherwise, it remains an unsolved problem how Spinoza's metaphysics contributes to the required "meditation of life".

In this article, I can only begin this inquiry, and I shall do so in three steps. In the first section, I discuss the relation of the assumed metaphysics of life to Spinoza's system of eternal truths. I will argue that an interpretation that seeks to vindicate a concern with human life in Spinoza's metaphysics needs not only to depart from the widespread reductionist picture of his system (according to which Spinoza reduced all things to items of one singular subject), but it must also go beyond the recent critiques of this picture. In the second section, I will give a few hints of how reality, as it is viewed from the human perspective, is accounted for in Spinoza's metaphysics. My point will be that human conceptions of real things are not so much overruled and replaced as they are acknowledged and corrected by assumed notions of eternal truths. In the third section, I conclude with a few reflections about the role of the human standpoint for Spinoza's philosophy.

1 Going Beyond the Critique of Spinoza's Reductionism

According to a common interpretation, the basic move of Spinoza's metaphysics is to claim that all the innumerable objects we encounter in ordinary life are merely properties or tropes of one singular entity. Following this monist account, Spinozism is often depicted as a radical departure from all descriptive metaphysical conceptual schemes underlying the practices and thoughts of our ordinary life: whereas in ordinary life, I see plenty of different things on my desk, such as a cup, pencils, sheets and notes, they are on Spinoza's view really nothing but modes of one singular subsistent being, which is referred to as God, nature, or substance.

1 The central role that engagement with our human, irreducibly situated, and historically embedded life plays in Spinoza's philosophy is also pointed out in Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), chapter 8; and in Susan James, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 2.

Now, it is true that Spinoza's system does not provide much vocabulary to describe these things, and that in his system, all categorical distinctions reduce to the difference between substance and modes.² Moreover, when it comes to accounting for the relations between different things and events, there is just the term *affectio*, the meaning of which is never explicitly clarified in the *Ethics*. In contrast, consider how differentiated a picture we get if we employ Aristotle's categories to objects on my desk: they constitute substances having qualities and quantitative determinations (my pencil is red and about five inches long); they are related (or not) with each other (the notes I have written on a sheet of paper only exist as long as the sheet of paper exists); they are located in space and time and situated in particular ways (I sit on a chair in front of my computer, to my right is my cup and the sheet of paper with my notes from yesterday); finally, there are actions and passions going on which result in particular effects (I take the pencil to write a few words on the paper and thus correct my notes from yesterday).

Clearly, if we compare this detailed, Aristotelian description with Spinoza's framework, on which all these things are simply classified as modes, the latter looks pretty poor—too poor, one might say, to reflect the categorical distinctions underlying our handling of objects in daily life. But this does not preclude that particular things exist for Spinoza, nor does he deny that these are numerically different items of reality. On the contrary, this is a non-sequitur, as has rightly been pointed out by several recent interpreters of the *Ethics* who refuse to interpret Spinoza's metaphysics in terms of a Pantheist monism or an acosmism according to which there is only one singular thing.

Yitzhak Melamed, for example, criticizes both the Parmenidean reading underlying Bayle's and Leibniz's objections as well as Hegel's acosmist interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy, according to which "all determinate content is swallowed up as radically null and void".³ On Melamed's account, these monist and acosmist readings are both inaccurate and contradict several of Spinoza's assumptions, including parallelism, the definition of the third kind of knowledge, and the notion expressed in E1p16 that "[f]rom the necessity of divine nature [...] infinitely many modes [must follow] in infinitely many ways" (G II 60, lines 17–19). All these claims, Melamed points out, are at odds with the claim that singular things are illusionary.⁴ In a different manner, but also relying on E1p16, Samuel Newlands argues against Della Rocca's ontologically reductionist reading of Spinoza's rationalism.⁵ On Newlands' view, what Spinoza voices in Ep1p16 is the opposite of any ontological reduction: viz., that God is the source of "plenitude" or the existence of infinitely many things.⁶ Finally, Martin Lin rejects the notion that Spinoza reduced the metaphysical (that is, what

2 See for this point Ursula Renz, *The Explainability of Experience. Realism and Subjectivity in Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 43–45.

3 Yitzhak Y. Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79.

4 Ibid., 79.

5 Michael Della Rocca, "A Rationalist Manifesto: Spinoza and the Principle of Sufficient Reason", *Philosophical Topics* 31, no. 1/2 (2003): 75–93. The radical rationalist reading is elaborated in detail in Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

6 Samuel Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19.

there is) to the conceptual or epistemic; as well, he rejects the substitution of an idealist understanding of Spinoza's rationalism for a realistic one.⁷

Unfortunately, these approaches are mostly negative in spirit: they provide strong counter-arguments to reductionist readings of the *Ethics* that push Spinoza either to the Parmenidean One or to the Hegelian abyss of nothingness, but they nonetheless stick with the inherited notion that Spinoza's metaphysical thought reduces to a revisionary system. As a consequence, they miss Spinoza's engagement with the conceptual schemes of our ordinary life, on which many entities come as singular and present things, and they thus continue to regard Spinoza's attitude towards the human life form as dismissive or deflationary. By contrast, I think there is also a positive story to be told about Spinoza's metaphysics of human life, and we may hope that it is this story that sets the agenda for future Spinoza research. But where shall we begin? To answer this question, I shall now take a closer look at a few points of Spinoza's philosophy where the concern with the metaphysical implications of human life become most visible.

2 Vindicating Spinoza's Descriptive Metaphysics (and Metaethics)

When Peter F. Strawson characterized in *Individuals* his approach as 'descriptive metaphysics', he relied on three basic assumptions. (1) Underlying the basic structures of our ordinary speech about objects are metaphysical commitments that are to be made explicit in metaphysics. Thus, what philosophers account for in metaphysical analysis is this implicit metaphysics of our ordinary life. (2) Metaphysics is, ideal-typically considered, a descriptive project: instead of producing revisionary images of the world, it reconstructs the "logics" underlying the conceptual schemes and distinctions we use to discern objects and persons in ordinary speech. (3) This is legitimate, because metaphysics thus describes the categories we successfully employ in daily life. There is no further need for justification than that in descriptive metaphysics, whereas any kind of revisionary metaphysics, which seeks to change our conceptual schemes, must be justified by the way it is of service to descriptive metaphysics.⁸

Strawson's approach makes a powerful case for the claim that there is much metaphysics underlying our ordinary thought, and he also assumes that this insight has been guiding metaphysicians at all times. Perhaps this was even the case in philosophies that provided rather revisionary outlooks on the world, to the effect that one may consider many revisionary systems as attempts not to substitute, but to correct, to simplify and—in this sense—to revise the metaphysics underlying our daily thought. This is, I contend, the case with Spinoza's philosophy: if his metaphysics turns into speculation, this is in the service of experience. In the following I shall point to different domains in which revisions of our implicit descriptive metaphysics may be observed.

7 Martin Lin, *Being and Reason. An Essay on Spinoza's Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 182ff.

8 P. F. Strawson, *Individuals. An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1971), 9. See also Ursula Renz, "Der neue Spinozismus und das Verhältnis von deskriptiver und revisionärer Metaphysik", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 63/3 (2015): 476–496, 478–481. doi: 10.1515/dzph-2015-0029, for a critical account of Strawson's approach.

a) Common sense realism and the simple grounds of being

It may be assumed that despite his seeming denial of finite beings, Spinoza embraces some sort of common-sense realism, i.e., he presupposes that the objects we perceive and deal with in our ordinary life by and large exist. This neither precludes that we err about their properties nor denies that we are subject to all sorts of illusions, but only affirms that we can rely on their existence and should not doubt it.

How can this interpretation be defended? Crucially, Spinoza often denotes the object of his considerations in the *Ethics* by the term *res*.⁹ Consider, e.g., E1def2, where he introduces the notion of finite things: “That thing [*res*] is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature” (G II 45, lines 8–9). And consider E1def7, where he specifies his understanding of freedom by saying that “[t]hat thing [*res*] is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone” (G II 46, lines 8–9). The term *res* also shows up in several propositions of the first half of Part One of the *Ethics*, e.g., when, in E1p3, he claims, “If things [*res*] have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other” (G II 47, lines 15–6), or, in E1p9, where he writes, “The more reality or being each thing [*unaquaeque res*] has, the more attributes belong to it” (G II 51, lines 24–25). Taking this at face value, Spinoza does not simply introduce his substance monism by stipulation. Instead, he first refers to items of reality as *res* before pointing out how different *res* are related and how this relatedness of *res* is ontologically grounded. This indicates that, however revisionary Spinoza’s ultimate picture of the world might look like, it is the objects of our daily metaphysics that constitute its point of departure: he takes seriously the supposition that the things we refer to as *res* truly exist, and it is only on the basis of this presumption that he discusses what it means for *res* to exist.

We can thus assume that *res*—and not *substantia* or ‘God’—names the subject-matter of Spinoza’s metaphysics, a proposal that Robert Schnepf already put forward a few decades ago.¹⁰ This assumption introduces a change of focus in the reconstruction of Spinoza’s metaphysics, since it suggests that Spinoza’s point was not to claim the uniqueness of substance, but to reveal the substantiality and complete connectedness of all being. In all likelihood, therefore, Spinoza’s ambition was not, in the first place, to *replace* the descriptive metaphysics of our ordinary thought by a perfect system, but to *make* its ontological implications *explicit*.

b) Dummy terms of daily speech and their limits

Among the most frequently employed notions of our descriptive metaphysics is certainly that of ‘things’ or, in more philosophical terminology, of ‘particulars’ and ‘individuals’. Now, unlike *res*, which in Spinoza’s time designated a transcendental term that was used to account for the ontological groundedness—the reality—of some object of thought, the contemporary expression ‘thing’ is a dummy term which we employ to refer to an item without qualifying it as being such and such. By naming an object ‘thing’, we indicate that there is a referring relation, but we do not specify its

9 Consider Robert Schnepf’s succinct analysis of Spinoza’s usage of the concept of *res* in the *Ethics*. Cf. Robert Schnepf, *Metaphysik im ersten Teil der Ethik Spinozas* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996), 135–169.

10 Ibid., 164ff.

nature. There is one point, though, we take for granted: we presuppose that the object in question is a particular, i.e., it is or appears to be separated from other objects.

Given the overall outlook of his system, it may come as a surprise that Spinoza uses equivalents of this dummy term, viz., *res singularis* and *res particularis*, which show up in several places in the *Ethics*. In E2def7, Spinoza explicitly clarifies this terminology, when he declares that the term *res singulares* refers to “things that are finite and have a determined existence” (G II 85, lines 16–17). Thus, on the face of it, Spinoza accepts the existence of entities corresponding to our dummy term ‘thing’. He continues, however, by adding a further sentence to this definition that relativizes the idea of the unity of singular things: “if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.” Thus, being *one singular thing* is a matter of producing *one causal effect*, however complex the internal constitution of the assumed cause may be. Whether or not we are confronted with a unified thing is therefore not due to its essential features, but to its causal relations with other things.

In the literature, this second sentence of E2def7 has attracted much more attention than the first. Given the widespread assumption of the revisionary character of Spinoza’s metaphysics, this is a natural focus. Yet, taken as a whole, the point of this definition is not to undermine our ordinary talk of things, but to limit the conclusions that may be drawn from it. To refer to items of reality as ‘singular things’ is a legitimate move; we just have to resist the temptation to infer anything further regarding their causal properties. If these observations are right, then Spinoza denies that the idea of there being individuated points of reference provides us with a causal understanding of the world. Although this relativizes the explanatory value we suppose the term ‘singular thing’ to have, it does not question that describing the objects of our daily experience in this way plays a role in our dealing with them. And the same is likely to hold true of other terms of our descriptive metaphysics that crop up in Spinoza’s thought, such as ‘individual’, ‘subject of action’ or the notion of a person’s identity. However provisional these terms may turn out to be, if we consider them as accounts for the whole of reality, they properly account for how we experience and describe reality on a daily basis. There is thus a kind of metaphysical talk in Spinoza’s philosophy that is less about the universe than about how things are experienced and conceived from within the human life.

c) Evaluations and the attempt of providing them with a rational framing

An important feature of our implicit philosophical language about the world is the presence of evaluative terms. We call some things ‘good’ and other things ‘bad’; we consider some people as ‘kind’, ‘clever’ or ‘wise’ and others as ‘idiots’, ‘evil’ or ‘mad’; we evaluate options in decisions about partners, professions or where to live based upon the question of whether or not they are apt to satisfy our desire for ‘a good life’ or make us ‘happy’.

Spinoza addresses the issue of how to make sense of this evaluative talk in several key passages of the *Ethics*. Having argued in E1app that, considered against the backdrop of the world-view provided in Part One, evaluative judgments are merely prejudices arising from the false supposition that natural things act on account of ends and are made by God to serve man (G II 78, lines 2–12), Spinoza further addresses the issue of our evaluative terminology in the preface, definitions and several propositions of Part Four. It is on this basis that he also voices a couple of moral judgments, thereby establishing his own ethics.

Interestingly, in doing so, Spinoza again seeks both *to acknowledge and to correct* the descriptive metaphysics (or rather metaethics) underlying both the prudential advice or moral prescriptions of our daily life and our implicit judgments concerning the viability, usefulness, kindness, or even goodness of certain actions. In a first step, Spinoza vindicates the evaluative statements of our moral speech by attributing to them a merely relativist validity. Thereby, he does not deny them all legitimacy, but only adds an index that defines their domain and makes explicit what this indexation is grounded in: that we consider something an aim that is worthwhile pursuing, he claims in E4pref, is due to our human appetites and serves no further end (G II 206, lines 29f.). It is on this basis that, in a further step, he sets out to provide our evaluative statements with a more reliable justification that orients our desires towards more satisfactory and sustainable aims.

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how exactly this justification works.¹¹ Let me just mention that in this justification, he neither discards the notion that good is what is good for us nor does he deny that moral judgments are related to desires; it is merely our ideas of what satisfies these desires that are erroneous and in need of substitution. So, rather than dismissing our striving for happiness, he embraces and affirms it while providing it with a better justified, ontologically grounded, conception of goodness that allows for rational adjustment of ethical reflection.

d) Temporal existence, politics and the eternal truth about our life

When we attribute existence to a thing in our daily life, what we mean to say is that it exists in time. We do not, however, commit ourselves to the view that this is necessarily the case; on the contrary, we are entitled to assume that things could have turned out differently. According to our ordinary ontology, attributing existence to some object is a matter of affirming that it is temporally determined, but it involves no modal restriction.

How does Spinoza account for this aspect of our descriptive metaphysics? Notably, he affirms both views, viz., that objects exist in time and that temporal determination involves no modal restriction. Most explicitly, he does so in E2ax1, which denies necessary existence to particular human beings: “from the order of nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist” (G II 85, lines 22–24). A similar point is made by E2def5, where Spinoza defines duration as being “an indefinite continuation of existing” (G II 85, line 10) and clarifies, “I say indefinite because it [the duration of continuing existence] cannot be determined at all through the very nature of the existing thing, nor even the efficient cause, which necessarily posits the existence of things, and does not take it away” (G II 85, lines 11–13). Taking this at face value, Spinoza does not merely accept the ordinary supposition that finite things have temporally limited and contingent existence, but he also corroborates this point by observing that for each finite thing and in each moment of its being, it is a contingent fact whether it continues to exist.

That Spinoza accepts these notions, as we also find them in our descriptive metaphysics, may look surprising, given the inherited picture of his metaphysics, but it is nonetheless key for his philosophy in general, and for his understanding of society, politics, and religion in particular. More

¹¹ But see my paper, Ursula Renz, “Spinoza on the Good Life for Humans”, in *Human: A History*, ed. Karolina Hübner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 196–219.

than by his metaphysical conception of reality in terms of divine substance, Spinoza's thought in these domains is due to the insight that what drives politics, religion, and many aspects of our social life is the experience of uncertainty. This experience is already expressed in the passages from Part Two quoted above, but how much it shapes Spinoza's social philosophy comes to the fore in E4ax, where he declares that "[t]here is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger [...] by which the first can be destroyed" (G II 210, lines 25–27). He thus ascribes to all finite things an ineliminable vulnerability to violent destruction, and this is no abstract claim, but a notion borrowed from our awareness of the uncertainty of our life as implicated in many of our emotional experiences.

That this notion of vulnerability is at the bottom of many of Spinoza's insights regarding people's social life is also indicated by the fact that in Part Four, it is voiced as an axiom, although it could be derived from previous assumptions. Considering moreover the preface of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza seems to assume that both religion and politics largely respond to this experience (G III 5, line 1ff.). We can thus surmise that he develops his political theory to provide a better understanding of this experience and thus to improve the communal handling of uncertainty. This all shows that, far from deriving his ideal of rational community-building and principles of good politics from the viewpoint of his necessitarian modal metaphysics, Spinoza accepts the modal terms of our descriptive metaphysics as an ineliminable feature of human reality.

At the same time, however, Spinoza sticks to the notion that, at the end of the day, even the temporal and contingent features of our actual existence may be captured in terms of eternal and necessary truths. Gaining a complete grasp of these truths may not be possible during our lives, but we may get a better understanding of them and thus come closer to epistemic perfection and wisdom. In this sense, the meditation of life practiced by free human beings, according to E4p67, is no negation or annihilation of the contingencies of each human's life. Rather, it embraces them as necessarily belonging to our existence, thus making room for a consideration of our life as an instance of nature's eternal being.

3 Understanding Humanity as an Entrance Ticket to Spinoza's Metaphysics of Life

Spinoza's metaphysics is often interpreted in anti-anthropomorphic as well as in anti-humanist terms.¹² Following an anti-anthropomorphic reading, Spinoza criticizes any thought that takes humanity as the measure of things; according to the anti-humanist view, his metaphysics is meant to deprive humanity of its alleged special status in the universe. Although different in focus, these readings point in the same general direction: the first takes Spinoza to criticize the specifically human way of conceiving things; the second has him reject, more specifically, a typically human conception of humans' place in the world. And they are both corroborated by a reconstruction of Spinoza's epistemology in terms of a critique of our inborn tendency to consider nature in anthropomorphic

12 See for these tendencies also Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza*, 4, and Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline", in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, eds. Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin E. H. Smith (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 149.

terms.¹³ As a result, they both frame Spinoza's metaphysics as a combination of a theocentric notion of the relation between God and humanity with a naturalist account of all things.

This framing has several merits. It is indeed crucial for any understanding of Spinoza's philosophy to see how anti-anthropomorphism shapes many aspects of his thought, and it is also an important lesson of Spinoza's naturalism that we have no special status whatsoever. And yet, it gives us only half the story; we get lost, quite literally, if we mistake it for the whole. As I have argued in this paper, Spinoza attributes reality to objects viewed from the human perspective, and far from simply denying the constitutive nature of our perspective, his philosophy is meant to *respond* to the worries created by our inclination to anthropomorphize nature. Furthermore, part of his response to these worries is derived from a perspective that is situated within, rather than without, the reality of human life. Although Spinoza recommends a therapy of looking at things *sub specie aeternitatis*, so that we let go many of our human impulses and expectations, this is no protection against all sadness and distress. The point of his therapy is therefore rather that we come to see and affirm our situation as inevitable, given how we are. Moreover, some problems, such as those deriving from political dysfunctionalities, may only be addressed if we understand how they are tied up with the anthropomorphic tendencies of people's thought.

Hence, although Spinoza considers humans as entities that are fully determined by nature, he also views the adoption of a finite, human viewpoint as a structural prerequisite for an ontology and metaethics that are to help people lead a better life. This suggests that he does not want to propose his theocentric naturalism as a *substitute* for our inborn anthropomorphism, but rather as a framework enabling us to *amend* our views from within. He does so by different means and with different attitudes, but he does not aim to overrule our ordinary ways of looking at things, but rather to accommodate and modify them.

I think there is much wisdom in this approach. If philosophy has a role to play in the prospects of people learning to live better, it will do so by capturing the essence of human life from within the human perspective. If asked, therefore, in which direction I would hope for Spinoza research to develop in the near future, I would point to the task of revisiting Spinoza's philosophy with an interest in the constitutive role of the human viewpoint. Comprehension of humanity—not the voice of God—is the entrance ticket to Spinoza's metaphysics of life.¹⁴

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13 See Sharp, *Spinoza*, 58f; and Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "The Causes of Free Will: Spinoza on Necessary, 'Innate', yet False Cognition", in *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 121–141; for critical discussion see Ursula Renz, "Spinozism as a Radical Anti-Nihilism. Spinoza on Being and the Valuableness of Being", *InCircolo* 10, (2020): 391–406, <https://www.incircolorivistafilosofica.it/spinozism-as-a-radical-anti-nihilism/>.

14 This is, for now, my final contribution to the project *Spinoza on the Concept of the Human Life Form*, which was funded from 2016–2021 by the Austrian Science Foundation (FWF), project number P 29072-G24. I am greatly indebted to all past members of the project: Marion Blancher, Namita Herzl, Barnaby Hutchins, Roman Schmid, Oliver Toth, Sarah Tropper, and Philip Waldner.

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The Influence of Spinoza's Concept of the Multitude on Debates about Populism and Representation in Democracies

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Keywords: Spinoza, multitude, people, power, representation, democracy.

1 Spinoza in the Near Future

In our view, the interests and problems of the present are the criteria for organizing our encounter with the ideas of the philosophers of the past. We will thus turn to Spinoza's works interested in reflecting on the present. This does not mean that we will merely use his ideas to support views that we have already defined and settled. Instead, we will listen to him in his own voice; that is how he can help us think about our present. Which paths Spinoza research will take in the coming years depends on what we think our present interests and problems are, since the present opens the door to the immediate future.

We propose a reading of Spinoza's political philosophy from the perspective of present democracies' crisis of representation. First, we analyse the difference between Spinoza and Hobbes, paying close attention to the respective concepts of multitude and people. Second, we assess the contributions that Spinoza's philosophy can offer to today's democracies. We argue that Spinoza's philosophical ontology can help us think about a conception of modern democracy in which no one embodies the totality and where the multitude knows and exercises its power of freedom.

2 Current Problems of Political Representation

The matter of representation is one of the most pressing political problems of recent decades. Marks of the problem include the growing disinterest and disaffection of citizens regarding party politics, populist strategies that use the overrepresentation of a charismatic leader, the migration of political

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decision-making to the heights of supranational organizations,¹ demands for greater citizen participation and control, and a desire for popular self-organization of the political agenda.²

Slogans such as “They don’t represent us” and “We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers” that were chorused in the demonstrations of the Spanish Indignados Movement expressed how far citizens were from party politics. This distance was in tune with theories of radical democracy that had emphasized the power of communication, whether in the manner of Hannah Arendt,³ Jürgen Habermas,⁴ or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.⁵ Furthermore, a certain Latin American left’s response to the crisis of representation and neoliberal policies, later imported into Europe, consisted of a vindication of populist forms of representation. This was in tune at the time with the theory of left-wing populism of Ernesto Laclau⁶ and Chantal Mouffe,⁷ and their unconditional defense of representation.⁸

For our part, we will briefly review the contrast between the logics of Hobbes’s represented people and Spinoza’s unrepresentable multitude. Then we will draw up an outline of how we think it is possible to apply Spinoza’s political ontology to the matrix of modern representative democracies in such a way that opens a fruitful path for discussion of the future of individual and collective freedom.

3 The People in Hobbes and the Multitude in Spinoza

Spinoza’s position is configured, in some ways, to be opposed to Hobbes’s: “As regards political theories, the difference between Hobbes and myself consists in this, that I always keep natural right alive and intact and that I affirm that in any political community the authorities do not have more right over their subjects than the measure of the power with which they surpass the subjects, which is the same thing that always takes place in the state of nature” (Ep 50, Spinoza to Jelles, 2 June 1674/G IV 238–239, authors’ translation).

Let us first explain Hobbes’s position so that we can better understand Spinoza’s. For Hobbes, a human being is, by nature, its *conatus* to continue existing. He or she is a being who lives in continuous fear of death and who, in order to secure his or her life, has an insatiable desire for more things and more power. Because of this, human beings collide with each other and strive to destroy or subjugate each other; the state of nature is thus a condition of war of every man against every man. To get out of this unfortunate situation, the best thing is that there are rules valid for everyone

1 Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013).

2 Dario Azzellini and Marina Sitrin, *They Can’t Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (London: Verso, 2014).

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 175–247.

4 Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 401–435 and 600–632.

5 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 22–41, 280–303, 353–369 and 404–405.

6 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2007).

7 Chantal Mouffe, *Por un populismo de izquierdas* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2018).

8 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 157–171.

and that each one renounces the ambition of his appetite and, therefore, the war of all against all. What is needed is a pact that creates a State and a government. With this covenant, the natural right of everyone to do what he wants (against peace and common security) disappears and human beings cease to be a multitude of individuals in conflict. They transform themselves into a “people,” a political community that has a capacity to act in a unified manner by common laws.⁹ In short, the pre-political, the multitude, becomes political, the people.

Human beings without a State may take into account the desires of others, but because they do not agree on what the common good is, each of them tends to pursue their own private benefit. But through covenant, the sovereign who is granted political power defines the common good and manages to weld the multitude of clashing individuals into a community.¹⁰ It is the unity of the representer—and not the unity of the represented—that makes dispersed individuals become a political community, a people;¹¹ this is why Hobbes points out that the sovereign is the artificial soul that gives life and movement to the whole body.¹² He explains that the ruler, as the representative of the multitude, is like a stage actor who wears a mask (πρόσωπον) and plays the role of the collective will.¹³ And thus Hobbes puts the concept of representation at the center of modern political reflection. Politics is a great theater in which the State puts a single text against the discordant voices of individuals in the state of nature.¹⁴ There is no politics without representation.

Hobbes puts the concept of representation at the center of the stage. As Skinner points out, Hobbes does this by criticizing proponents of parliamentarism who advocate limiting royal power.¹⁵ Instead of holding that real power derives from God and is absolute, these writers devise a non-religious theory according to which power comes from the people in the form of a contract: the king must rule according to the terms of that contract. That the parliament represents the people means that it is like a totally representative portrait of the features of each of its parts; it therefore *acts in their name*.

Hobbes’s starting point is similar: man has complete natural freedom and the only way this freedom can be legitimately restricted is by the explicit consent of those who agree to submit to government. Thus, on Hobbes’s view, the people, through the covenant, are the authors of political authority.¹⁶ Yet Hobbes does not want to endorse the radical implications of the parliamentarians who claim that royal power is limited and depends on the authorization of people in the form of a contract, that the king must rule according to the terms and limitations of that contract, and that the resolutions of the parliament are the voice of the people. That is why he argues that before the covenant, there is not a sovereign people who hold power, but rather a multitude of diverse individuals in conflict. Strictly speaking, the *people* do not exist before the covenant and so they cannot be a

9 Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive: The Latin Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 137.

10 Christian David Núñez, “La Representación en el *Leviatán* de Hobbes: la metamorfosis del hombre natural en persona civil,” *Revista Filosofía UIS* 21, no. 1 (2022): 281. doi: [10.18273/revfil.v21n1-2022013](https://doi.org/10.18273/revfil.v21n1-2022013).

11 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 114.

12 Ibid., 9.

13 Ibid., 112.

14 Yves Charles Zarka, *Hobbes et la pensée politique moderne* (Paris: PUF, 2012), 3736 (Kindle pagination).

15 Quentin Skinner, “Hobbes on Representation,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 155. doi: [10.1111/j.0966-8373.2005.00226.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0966-8373.2005.00226.x).

16 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 112–113.

part of that contract: the contract is of each person with each person of the multitude. Once this contract is made and power is given to a representative, this representative, through common laws, converts the discordant multiplicity of voices and wills into one voice and one will: it creates the people (again, “it is the unity of the representer, not the unity of the represented that makes the multitude one person”).¹⁷ In a sense, representation passes off the political decisions of the rulers as if they were really always individual decisions of the citizens. With this, representation gives a reason to obey the laws besides coercion and force.

The importance given to the sovereign means that there is, in some way, a reversal of roles: the representative, the sovereign, is not a mere *actor* who represents the people and speaks in their place, but is also the *author* of laws and politics.¹⁸ All in all, to have any prospect of living together in peace and security, we simply must allow our representative to personify the monstrous power of the State (“the great Leviathan”).¹⁹

According to Spinoza, in contrast, the existence of a State does not imply that the multitude is left without political agency or rights. The reason for this is the basis of Spinoza's political philosophy: government is defined by the power of the multitude (TP 2.17/G III 282). Like so many definitions in Spinoza, this definition is genetic: the power of the multitude generates the power and the right of the rulers (where power and right are, for Spinoza, two sides of the same coin). The power of the rulers decreases to the extent that it outrages the majority and gives reasons for many to conspire in unison; the rulers thus have reason to fear (TP 3.9/G III 288). Political power works well when it is an expression of the real power of the multitude, but if it goes against the multitude, it will end up overwhelmed by reality, as the power of many is much greater than the power of one or a few (TP 2.13/G III 281). In Spinoza's political ontology, power is a function of reality.

There is no political theory of representation in Spinoza's works. The term ‘representation’ appears with epistemological meaning only, as in the case, for instance, of the mental images that the prophets had (TTP 2/G III 34) and the ideas that represent reality to us (E2p17s/G II 105; E3p27d/G II 160). Spinoza, in his definitive version of his political philosophy, the *Political Treatise*, abandons the concept of pact that he had used in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP 20/G III 242–5; 16/G III 191–193; 196–197).²⁰ The ideas concerning *conatus*, *potentia*, immanent cause, and the composite individual that Spinoza develops in the *Ethics*, as well as the concept of the power of the multitude that is absolutely essential in the *Political Treatise*,²¹ make a theory of contract unnecessary. Now the political problem is the relationship between the multitude and political power, not the

17 Ibid., 114.

18 Zarka, *Hobbes*, 3928 (Kindle Pagination); Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 189.

19 Skinner, “Hobbes,” 179.

20 See Francisco Javier Espinosa Antón, “L’obéissance de l’individu et l’indignation contre la loi : que peut la multitude?,” *Revue internationale de Philosophie* 295, no. 1 (2021): 41–42. See also Laurent Bove, Pierre-François Moreau and Charles Ramond, “Le Traité Politique: une radicalisation conceptuelle?,” in *La multitude libre. Nouvelles lectures du Traité Politique*, eds. Chantal Jaquet, Pascal Sévérac and Ariel Suhamy (Paris: Éds. Amsterdam, 2008), 27–43.

21 “Multitude” in the *Political Treatise* is no longer synonymous with the negative concept of “vulgo,” but is a positive thing. See Francisco Javier Espinosa Antón, “Los individuos en la multitude,” in *Co-herencia* 28, vol. 15 (2018), 185–189. See also Paolo Cristofolini, “Peuple et multitude dans le lexique politique de Spinoza,” in Jaquet, Sévérac and Suhamy, *Multitude libre*, 45–58.

relationship between the individual and the sovereign.²² Spinoza's political philosophy, which is naturalistic and immanent, affirms that the multitude, through the play of inter-individual relations and affections, organizes itself and possesses its own instituting force, which renders recourse to the thesis of contract useless in forming the State.²³ This is the effect of a natural right, conceived as *jus sive potentia* of the multitude, so that the cause, the natural right, is maintained in what it produces, the State. As we have indicated in the first quoted text of Spinoza (Ep 50, Spinoza to Jelles, 2 June 1674/G IV 238–239), natural rights are always maintained (because they are the immanent cause).

So, for Spinoza, no political power can fully represent the multitude.²⁴ No one can claim to hold the whole opinion and will of the multitude. It is impossible for anybody to represent its complex and dynamic multiplicity, to paralyze and fasten in a determination the movement of its power.²⁵ Spinoza's multitude is the name of the irreducibility of political reality to the facticity of dominion.²⁶

The multitude, or rather the multitudes of the different polities, are contingent networks of diverse singularities. They have neither an indestructible power nor a beneficent strength capable of assuring a flourishing future without doubt. Sometimes evil affects prevail and pull men in different directions (TP 8.6/G III 320). But active affects and reason can also guide other multitudes that then behave as one mind.²⁷ For Spinoza, common reason leads to a stronger union of the multitude than does Hobbesian representation, the surrender of all wills to one.²⁸ However, this does not mean that all the members of the multitude must hold the same opinion. In one place, Spinoza describes the multitude as an *animorum unio*, emphasizing that the binding force of the multitude lies in common feelings and in the desire to make common decisions rather than in a homogeneity of ideas (TP 3.7/G III 287). Of course, however, for people to unite in a common feeling, they must also have a common background of ideas.²⁹

In conclusion, according to Spinoza, representatives cannot create the collective actor and this actor does not need representatives to act. The collective actor exists and acts when there is social cooperation and life in common. The multitude is the product and the producer of this common life. The power of the multitude is immanent to common life, and rulers or political leaders can neither fully seize this power, nor confine it in the political symbolism of representation that they create in their attempt to transcend the immanence of the multitude.

22 Aurelio Sainz Pezonaga, *La multitud libre en spinoza*, PhD diss., (University of Castilla-La Mancha, 2020), 258. URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/10578/23340>.

23 Chantal Jaquet, "L'actualité du *Traité Politique* de Spinoza," in Jaquet, Sévérac and Suhamy, *Multitude libre*, 19.

24 Antonio Negri, "Eine Ontologische Definition der Multitude," In *Kritik der Weltordnung: Globalisierung, Imperialismus, Empire*, eds. Thomas Atzert and Jost Müller (Berlin: ID Verlag, 2003), 111–125.

25 Manfred Walther, "From *Potestas Multitudinis* in Suárez to *Potentia Multitudinis* in Spinoza," *Studia Spinozana* 16, (2008): 146. The potency of the multitude is *never completely* "absorbed" or "consumed" by the directive power and the institutional design it creates.

26 Espinosa Antón, "L'Obéissance," 51.

27 See Espinosa's analysis of *una veluti mente ducitur* in Francisco Javier Espinosa Antón, "Être une Multitude et agir comme une seule âme," in *Spinoza. Ser e Agir*, eds. Maria Luísa Ribeiro Ferreira, Diogo Pires Aurélio and Olivier Feron (Lisboa: Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, 2011), 143–148.

28 Aurelio Sainz Pezonaga, *La multitud libre en spinoza* (Granada: Comares, 2021), 48.

29 Espinosa Antón, "L'obéissance," 47–50.

4 Spinoza and Political Representation

There are at least two respects in which today's democracies do not follow Hobbes's model of political representation: first, through the periodic election of rulers and second, through the importance of the free expression of opinions and desires.³⁰ In any case, we can still see its influence in many political theories that show a manifest distrust of the people. According to these theories, rulers must lead, construct, unite, interpret, excite... the people. We see this in the theory of Schumpeter, who thinks that the relationship between rulers and ruled is like that of the taxi driver and the user: the user can periodically take any taxi he or she wants, but they should not tell the taxi driver how to drive.³¹ We can also see this in the conception of technocracy: the people are ignorant and only experts can steer the ship of state.³² In a way, it is also present in Laclau's populism, for whom representatives must construct the people as the subject of social change. Representatives must construct it from one particular side, since, as in Hobbes, the multitude is by itself incapable of collective action³³ (it is true, though, that Mouffe and Laclau maintain a conception of democracy as the freedom of anyone to struggle to construct and reconstruct the people).³⁴ It is also seen in nationalism, where the starting point is a people, the nation, already given, and which is, in a way, the recreation and personification of bourgeois interests. Nationalism conceives humanity as made up of different national personifications.³⁵ And it appears in the conception that a certain Marxism proposes of a universal class already constituted.³⁶

The problem with these theories, each somewhat inspired by Hobbes, is that all of them, despite their differences, want a part (the leader, the ruler, the nation, the class...) to embody, and act for, the whole. They view the whole as having no internal power of acting and needing to be created from the outside. Spinoza's political view, with its concept of the multitude, is wider: political powers certainly can construct the multitude and use people as slaves, but the multitude also has the power to rebel against this domination and to autonomously shape itself (TP 5.6/G III 296). For Spinoza the multitude becomes more powerful to the extent that it forms and unites through the shared joy of cooperative action, develops concord out of diversity, and increases the power of citizens (the more they know the world and themselves, the more critical they can become). We could say that democracy, for Spinoza, consists in the increase of the power of acting of the multitude and of the individuals in the multitude. Democratic political construction can thus only be the work of the multitude.

30 Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6.

31 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 241–251.

32 One example is the banking expert Mario Monti who became Prime Minister of Italy in 2011 without being elected by the Italian people.

33 Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 239–242.

34 Mouffe, *Populismo*, 116–120; Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 161–162, 170–171. Laclau had already said so in “Power and Representation,” in Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 99–101.

35 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Reden an die Deutsche Nation,” VIII, in *Werke 1808–1812, Gesamtausgabe*, I, 10, eds. Reinhard Lauth et al. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2005), 198–213.

36 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 46–82.

There are many types and degrees of power of acting in the different multitudes that exist. But for Spinoza, rulers or leaders can never represent a multitude in the totality of its power once and for all. They cannot decide on their own will what “reflecting” the interests of the people consists of, nor can their independence be absolute. On the contrary, we could say that a multitude has more power, and democracy works better, when the multitude has the power to decide whether it sees its interests and demands reflected in the action of the ruler. It must always have the power to claim that its rulers do not represent it, to point out that the government is not its personification.

Elective representation thus appears as an indefinite process that depends on the multitude and creates a political culture always open to its mandates. Since the multitude is always political, it is the ruler who must adapt to its life and power: it is the ruler who must work to translate the common desire of the multitude in such a way that the power of acting of that desire can become ever greater. Whoever claims to be the total representative of the people, be it a Hobbesian sovereign, those inspired by Schumpeter’s elitist democracy,³⁷ or a populist leader, in fact seeks to subjugate the multitude.³⁸

The question is: what institutional changes does an increase in the power of acting of the multitude require? And what force would make such changes possible? The most general answer to the first question is that such changes must lead the multitude to a better understanding of public affairs, to reasoned debates and, finally, to translate its will into political agency. There should therefore be institutional changes in the education system and in journalism as a public service.

A more concrete answer would enable us to address the second question. It requires us to think about the multitude, social cooperation, and the strength of life in common in present-day conditions. Here and now, social movements play a very active role. Feminism, environmentalism, egalitarianism, pacifism, sexual liberation, anti-racism, LGBTI+... are movements that the multitude has traced and continues to trace in search of its freedom.³⁹ They are movements of the multitude and want to make themselves felt politically and especially to be politically effective. As Nancy Fraser says, public opinion, which must involve everyone, needs to be effective and to have a real influence on those in power.⁴⁰ The public sphere is thus understood as an institution through which public opinion

37 Sandra Leonie Field, *Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–4.

38 Our reading brings us close to the theory of representation proposed over the last two decades by Nadia Urbinati in *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 132–135 and *Democracy Disfigured. Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 6–21. Another important contemporary contribution to the theory of political representation, which would also be close to our proposal, is that of Michael Saward, as presented in *Making Representations. Claims, Counterclaims and the Politics of Acting for Others* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2020), chap. 1. In any case, both Urbinati and Saward, as well as other scholars who subscribe to the so-called constructivist approach (like eds. Lisa Disch, Nadia Urbinati, and Mathijs van de Sande, *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), fail to detach their theories from the Hobbesian proposal of representation as the symbolic constitution of the unity of the people. See Nadia Urbinati, “Representative Constructivism’s Conundrum,” in Disch, Urbinati and Van de Sande, *The Constructivist Turn*, 183; Saward, *Making Representations*, chap. 1.

39 Aurelio Sainz Pezonaga, “Where is Spinoza’s Free Multitude Now?,” *Stasis* 12, no. 2 (2022): 228–249. URL: <https://stasisjournal.net/index.php/journal/article/view/204>.

40 Nancy Fraser, “Die Transnationalisierung der Öffentlichkeit. Legitimität und Effektivität der Öffentlichen Meinung in einer Postwestfälischen Welt,” in *Anarchie der kommunikativen Freiheit*, eds. Peter Niesen and Benjamin Herborth (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 224–225.

becomes political power, so that whoever commands, commands by obeying. If public opinion and public will do not determine political authority, then politics becomes the expression of the powers that be.

On the other hand, we must consider the contemporary multitude not only in its relationship with the state, but also in its relationship with other spheres of society. For example, the awareness and resistance work of social movements aims not only to introduce changes in the legal-political order, but also to modify society's own behaviour. And we cannot reduce the plurality of issues and views that cut across the multitude to the unity of a territorial representative or to the cleavages created by political parties.⁴¹ Contemporary multitudes also have an international, transnational, or global dimension. The scope of their actions extends beyond the national territories of representation, both because communication crosses borders and ideas spread from one point of the planet to another, and because the problems they address go beyond the borders of states: wars, the environment, the economic market, the poverty of millions of human beings, cultural production...

As can be seen, the problem of democracy in our time spurs us to rethink Spinoza's ideas about the multitude and will probably continue to spur on such rethinking in the near future. We have not attempted to address all the issues that this conception of the multitude raises for current thinking, but have only tried to suggest some of the benefits it can bring to political thought. We have left many questions open. *Reliqua desiderantur*.⁴²

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41 Nadia Urbinati and Mark E. Warren, "The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 396–400. doi: [10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053006.190533](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053006.190533).

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Spinoza's Dynamic Theory of Mind in the 21st Century

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Keywords: Spinoza, belief, emotion, desire, affect

1 Methodological Reflection

There are surely many important aspects of Spinoza's thought that remain underexplored in the contemporary scholarship. But rather than focusing my contribution to this volume on scholarly lacunae, I want to call attention to a different kind of neglect, one that results not from the lack of interpretative work, but from the lack of philosophical analysis. Put simply: I think that there are facets of Spinoza's philosophical system that have not received the level of attention that they deserve in contemporary philosophy and that Spinoza scholars bear some responsibility for this. I will discuss below some of the promising features of his moral psychology, recognizing that similar things could be said about other aspects of his work.

While other modern philosophers have left enduring marks on contemporary ethical and political philosophy, even counting prominent contemporary philosophers as adherents, Spinoza is altogether absent from most contemporary surveys and anthologies in the field.¹ What might justify Spinoza's exclusion from the contemporary landscape? Perhaps his views are archaic and untenable on their face. I don't think that is right, for reasons I will spell out below. Perhaps, then, they are not especially distinctive. But I don't think that that is right either. While his moral and political views bear the clear influence of Thomas Hobbes, careful examination reveals he is far more than just a renegade Hobbesian.²

- 1 To note just a few prominent examples, one can think of David Gauthier and Gregory Kavka's reconstructions of Hobbes, Robert Nozick's (not uncritical) neo-Lockean theory of rights, Bernard Williams' and Michael Smith's revival of Humean theories of motivation, Simon Blackburn's revival of Humean metaethics, and the proliferation of Kantian constructivism, including many important works by John Rawls, Onora O'Neill, and Christine Korsgaard.
- 2 S. L. Field, *Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on power and popular politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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Instead of *justifications* for Spinoza's exclusion from contemporary moral and political discourse, perhaps we should look for mere explanations. One partial explanation is just that his normative views are not especially well known. While Spinoza is hardly a marginal figure in the history of philosophy, the forbidding, systematic nature of his philosophy hinders the extent to which his views can be effectively taught in survey courses. And since his moral and political views cannot be adequately understood without first tackling his austere metaphysics, the barrier to entry is quite high. To a certain degree, then, this obstacle is endemic to Spinoza's system.

Still, we scholars can do more to raise Spinoza's profile and lower the barrier to entry. In recent years, several people have written works on Spinoza for a more general readership, which has helped to generate further interest in Spinoza outside of the academy.³ This is unquestionably a good thing. But more can be done *within philosophy* to make the case to our colleagues that Spinoza is worth taking seriously.

Unfortunately, disciplinary norms somewhat discourage reconstructive or rehabilitative projects these days. Work in history of philosophy has become increasingly sensitive to the ways in which philosophical writings reflect the debates and inquiries of the author's proximate intellectual milieu. By and large this has been a salutary shift, pushing back against the reading of the history of philosophy as a conversation between "great men" who rise above parochial concerns to engage in transhistorical philosophical analysis. But it has also bred a "stay in your own lane" mentality and an outsized fear of anachronism, the great bogeyman of historians of philosophy. This has only further marginalized the history of philosophy *within philosophy*, contributing to the impression that we scholars are antiquarians who are more concerned with historical exactitude than philosophical fruitfulness.

But why can't we be concerned with *both* history and philosophy? To be sure, we cannot assess the truth of a doctrine until we have adequately understood it. But once we have a reasonably good grasp of the view, it seems to me that the natural next step—which perhaps we have been conditioned to suppress—is to ask: is it plausible? Even if the answer is an unequivocal 'no,' it seems that the question should be asked. And yet it is somewhat uncommon these days to find work in history of philosophy directly engaging with the philosophical merits of the view. Perhaps the worry is that if we acknowledge that a view is implausible, we will contribute to consigning the argument, and perhaps the larger text, to the dustbin of history. But this worry is misplaced not only because there is often much to be learned from failed arguments and implausible views, but also because we are hardly saving texts from this dustbin by refusing to engage with the merits of the arguments.

My plea, then, is that once we have done the hard work of interpreting a historical text, we take that natural next step and engage with the philosophy, because if we do not, we can be sure our colleagues will not either. With these prefatory remarks in mind, let me turn now to Spinoza's moral psychology.

3 See e.g., Matthew Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* (New York: Norton, 2006); Rebecca Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew who gave us Modernity* (New York: Nextbook, Schocken, 2006); Steven Nadler, *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on how to Live and how to Die* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020).

2 Spinoza's Dynamic Theory of Mind: A Primer

In the past several decades, psychologists, neuroscientists, and cognitive theorists have disputed the merits of the so-called “Spinozan” theory of belief formation that emerged out of Daniel Gilbert’s pioneering work in the early 1990s.⁴ In contrast with the “Cartesian” procedure, according to which comprehension precedes assessment (see the relative roles of the understanding and will in *Meditation* 4), the “Spinozan” theory claims that (1) to have an idea (that is, to comprehend something) is, initially, to accept it, and (2) rejection and disbelief are temporally posterior to, and more effortful than, acceptance.

Support for the Spinozan or “belief-default” view comes from a wide range of sources. Child psychology confirms what is well-known by experience: small children are hilariously credulous. Psycholinguistic evidence reveals that the ability to negate emerges late ontogenetically, and that processing negatives remains more difficult than processing non-negative information (see!) throughout one’s life.⁵ Moreover, doubt, disbelief, and negation are not only late to emerge, they are also quick to recede when burdened or depleted, as work on indoctrination and belief-revision confirm.⁶ If, as some researchers postulate, cognitive systems evolved out of perceptual systems, it stands to reason that cognitive representations would initially be ‘taken as true’ just as deliverances of the senses are.⁷ There are efficiency advantages to this default.⁸

The Spinozan view also receives direct support from several psychological experiments. Here I will discuss just two sets of studies. The first is a variant on a study by Ross, et al. (1975) in which subjects were asked to distinguish between real and fake suicide notes, given feedback about their abilities to discern the real from the fake, and then partially debriefed, at which point subjects were informed that the feedback was fabricated. The study found that subjects continued to be influenced by the fabricated feedback even after the partial debriefing. Daniel Wegner and colleagues

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- 4 Daniel T. Gilbert, Douglas S. Krull and Patrick S. Malone, “Unbelieving the Unbelievable: Some Problems in the Rejection of False Information,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59 (1990): 601–613. doi: [10.1037/0022-3514.59.4.601](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.59.4.601); Daniel T. Gilbert, “How Mental Systems Believe,” *American Psychological Association* 46, no. 2 (1991): 107–119. doi: [10.1037/0003-066X.46.2.107](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.46.2.107); Daniel T. Gilbert, Romin W. Tatarodi and Patrick S. Malone, “You Can’t Not Believe Everything You Read,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, no. 2 (1993): 221–233. doi: [10.1037/0022-3514.65.2.221](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.65.2.221); Andy Egan, “Seeing and Believing: Perception, Belief Formation and the Divided Mind,” *Philosophical Studies* 140, no. 1 (2008): 47–63. doi: [10.1007/s11098-008-9225-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-008-9225-1); Bryce Huebner, “Troubles with Stereotypes for Spinozan Minds,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 39, no. 1 (2009): 63–92. doi: [10.1177/0048393108329363](https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393108329363); Erik Asp and Daniel Tranel, “False Tagging Theory: Toward a Unitary Account of Prefrontal Cortex Function,” in *Principles of Frontal Lobe Function*, eds. Donald T. Stuss and Robert T. Knight (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013²); Eric Mandelbaum, “Thinking is Believing,” *Inquiry* 57, no. 1 (2014): 55–96. doi: [10.1080/0020174X.2014.858417](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2014.858417); Eric Mandelbaum and Jake Quilty-Dunn, “Believing without Reason, or: Why Liberals Shouldn’t Watch Fox News,” *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 22, (2015): 42–52. doi: [10.5840/harvardreview2015226](https://doi.org/10.5840/harvardreview2015226).
 - 5 Mandelbaum, “Thinking.”; Gilbert, “Mental Systems.”
 - 6 Robert J. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China* (New York: Norton, 1961); Leon Festinger and Nathan Maccoby, “On Resistance to Persuasive Communications,” *Journal of Psychopathology and Clinical Science* 68, no. 4 (1964): 359–366. doi: [10.1037/h0049073](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0049073); Gilbert, “Mental Systems.”
 - 7 Ibid.; Mandelbaum, “Thinking.”; Mandelbaum and Quilty-Dunn, “Believing without Reason.”
 - 8 For doubts, see Dan Sperber et al., “Epistemic Vigilance,” *Mind and Language* 25, no. 4 (2010): 359–393. doi: [10.1111/j.1468-0017.2010.01394.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0017.2010.01394.x).

subsequently ran a version of the experiment in which subjects were informed *prior* to receiving the feedback that it would be fabricated, and subjects were *still* inclined to give credence to the feedback, suggesting that simply hearing the feedback—that is, tokening the idea that they were discerning (or undiscerning) judges—produced assent, even though this feedback should have been preempted by the disclaimer.⁹

Another series of studies examined the impact of cognitive load on a subject's ability to process information tagged as true or false. In one of these studies, Gilbert and colleagues had subjects view a monitor on which exacerbating or mitigating information about crimes scrolled across one part of the screen, where information coded in black was to be taken as true and information coded in red was to be taken as false or disregarded. A group of subjects were then put under cognitive load—by being tasked with monitoring scrolling information on another part of the screen—and then asked to mete out prison terms for the crimes based on the information. While the control group (i.e., unburdened subjects) was virtually unaffected by the (to-be-ignored) false information, the burdened subjects recommended twice as much jailtime when the false (to-be-ignored) information was exacerbating than when it was mitigating. Subsequent studies reveal similar results: cognitive depletion disposes us towards belief and disarms our capacity for doubt and disbelief.¹⁰

We see then that there is, at the very least, some solid empirical support for the “Spinozan” view of belief-formation. In light of this, it falls to those of us who work on Spinoza to answer a couple of crucial questions: (1) to what extent was Spinoza a “Spinozan” about belief? (2) what, if anything, might be gained from returning to Spinoza himself?

With respect to the first question, I think that the answer is a highly qualified ‘yes.’

Something like the belief-default account seems to be expressed in E2p49s, when Spinoza defends his claim that volitions are intrinsic to ideas (and are in fact “one and the same” thing) against objections.¹¹ In the scholium he replies to the charge that experience shows that “we can suspend our judgment so as not to assent to things we perceive,” by asserting:

[I]f the mind perceived nothing else except [a] winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence...unless either the imagination of the winged horse were joined to an idea which excluded [*tollit*] the existence of the same horse, or the mind perceived that its idea of a winged horse was inadequate. And then either it will necessarily deny the horse's existence, or it will necessarily doubt it (E2p49s/G II 134, lines 32–39).

In other words, Spinoza claims that to comprehend a winged horse *is*, at least in the first instance, to affirm it; doubt and disbelief are posterior to belief.

9 Daniel M. Wegner, Gary F. Coulton, and Richard Wenzlaff, “The Transparency of Denial: Briefing in the Debriefing Paradigm,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49, no. 2 (1985): 338–346. doi: [10.1037/0022-3514.49.2.338](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.49.2.338). For another variant, see Gilbert, Krull and Malone, “Unbelieving the Unbelievable.”

10 See Gilbert, Tatarodi, and Malone, “You Can’t Not Believe.”

11 While he initially indicates that the volitions intrinsic to ideas are “this and that affirmation, and this and that negation” (E2p49d), the ensuing discussion suggests that, in the first instance, ideas involve *affirmations*.

Importantly, though, Spinoza's own account goes beyond the "Spinozan" view in that it accounts for doubt and disbelief through the formation of *other* (affirmative) ideas: either through an idea that neutralizes the original, leaving one in a state of suspension, or through one that excludes [*tollit*] the existence of the thing (or proposition) conceived (E2p49s). Crucially, as Diane Steinberg has observed, "exclusion" here must not be understood in terms of the symmetrical relation of logical incompatibility.¹² Rather, exclusion occurs when one has an idea that is logically incompatible with *and stronger than* another.¹³

This power-based account of belief underlies Spinoza's analysis of error and the two ideas of the sun in E2p35s, where he maintains that the mere (belief-like) imagining of the sun as close does not result in an erroneous judgment provided that this idea is accompanied by—and presumably overpowered by—an idea of the sun's true distance. He makes the point about power explicit when he maintains that a confused imagination is not removed by the mere presence of the truth, but rather "because there occur [other ideas], *stronger than them [iis fortiores]*, which exclude the present existence of the things we imagine, as we showed in IIP17" (E4p1s—emphasis added). Here, as elsewhere, Spinoza insists ideas are not like "mute" pictures, or inert images (E2p43s; E2p49s), but are rather "action[s] of the mind" (E2def3), modes of thought with an intrinsic force or power.

From this, we see one crucial way in which Spinoza's own account goes beyond what is maintained on the "Spinozan" model: his account of belief-formation is tied to an account of belief-revision, one that could be empirically tested, and which might valuably supplement the "Spinozan" model. Moreover, it is part of a larger framework that we might call his *dynamic theory of the mind*.¹⁴ In light of this, we may turn to the second question: even if something like the Spinozan view is right, what is to be gained from turning back to the progenitor of the view? In what follows, I will provide a partial answer to this question (recognizing that other Spinoza scholars will have more to say here) by showing that other components of Spinoza's dynamic theory of mind—specifically, his theory of affects and motivation—are also somewhat credible, and that Spinoza's account not only systematizes these claims, showing how they hang together, but also helps to explain disparate downstream psychological phenomena. What follows is just a sketch, but it should give one a sense of why I think that Spinoza's dynamic theory of mind merits serious philosophical consideration today.

As we have seen, Spinoza's version of the belief-default view is rooted in his claims about the power of ideas. With respect to doxastic states, we may say that the power of an idea relative to

12 Diane Steinberg, "Belief, Affirmation, and the Doctrine of the *Conatus* in Spinoza," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 1 (2010): 147–158. doi: [10.1111/j.2041-6962.2005.tb01948.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2005.tb01948.x).

13 The question of how we are to understand the strength or power of an idea is enormously difficult. As I see it, Spinoza allows for several different dimensions to an idea's power. As a first pass, we may say that the power of an idea can be understood in terms of its capacity to direct one's thinking.

14 See Michael Della Rocca, "The Power of an Idea: Spinoza's Critique of Pure Will," *Noûs* 37, no. 2 (2003): 200–231. doi: [10.1111/1468-0068.00436](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0068.00436); Steinberg, "Belief."; Justin Steinberg, "Two Puzzles Concerning Spinoza's Conception of Belief," *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2018): 261–282. doi: [10.1111/ejop.12218](https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12218); Martin Lenz, "Spinoza on the Interaction of Ideas: Biased Beliefs," in *Spinoza and Relational Autonomy: Being with Others*, eds. Aurelia Armstrong, Keith Green, and Andrea Sangiacomo (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

other ideas determines one's credence or grade of belief.¹⁵ But affirmative power—or doxastic power—is not the only dimension of ideational power. To see this, consider his account of affects. There are three specific features that I want to highlight about Spinoza's notion of affect [*affectus*]. First, under the attribute of Thought,¹⁶ affects are doubly representational: they represent at once the affecting object(s) or cause(s) *and* changes in one's body's power of acting.¹⁷ Second, they are motivating: when we represent something—be it some object or state of affairs—*joyfully*, our striving is directed towards that thing; conversely, when we represent some thing *sadly*, our striving is directed towards the removal of this deflating object (E3p12 and 13, E3p28). Finally, affects are evaluative: to represent something joyfully, and so to desire it (3p37), just *is* to regard it as good. Indeed, on the interpretation that I endorse, not only are affects evaluative, evaluative judgments are reducible to affects and ideas of them (E4p8): to evaluate just is to represent an object affectively.¹⁸

By conceiving of affects as representations of changes in one's body's power of acting (roughly: changes in one's homeostatic functioning) that take particular objects, constitute appraisals of those objects, and direct one's activity in relation to those objects, Spinoza's account has much in common with contemporary theories of affect like those of Jesse Prinz and Antonio Damasio. Such theories seek to account for the unification of the *embodied*, *intentional*, *motivational*, and *evaluative* components of emotions.¹⁹ In its general contours, Spinoza's account of affects seems to be every bit as much of a live option today as his account of belief-formation is.

And, as with his account of belief, his account of affect and motivations is fundamentally *dynamic*. What we think and do is determined by the *power* of affects. On this point, Spinoza is, in his own way, rejecting the alleged “combat between passion and reason” famously critiqued by Hume (*Treatise* 2.3.3). But while Hume thinks that the combat model does not sufficiently distinguish between cognitive and conative states, which he thinks play fundamentally different roles in our mental economy, Spinoza rejects the assumption that reason and affects (or appetites) constitute distinct motivational streams, claiming instead that reason motivates precisely because it *is* affective (E3p59; E4p19).

To better appreciate how Spinoza understood the relationship between cognitive and conative states, let me say more about how I think that the “doxastic” and “affective” powers of ideas relate

15 Admittedly, Spinoza does not have a fully worked out analysis of credences or degrees of beliefs, though his account of doubt and disbelief could be seen as the start of such an account.

16 When Spinoza defines “affect” [*affectus*] in E3def3, he allows that affects are at once bodily states and ideas of those bodily states. But he sometimes restricts the discussion to “affects of the mind” (E2a3) and “passion[s] of the mind” (E3, general definition of the affects/G II 203, line 29).

17 There is room for debate concerning whether one could experience joy or sadness without an object (its putative triggering cause) (E3p56d). E2a3 implies that “affects of mind” necessarily take an object; but Spinoza does allow that we can separate affects from *external* causes (E5p2), leaving only, it would seem, an objectless feeling of joy or sadness.

18 See Justin Steinberg, “Affect, Desire, and Judgement in Spinoza's Account of Motivation,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (2016): 67–87. doi: [10.1080/09608788.2015.1087837](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1087837); Justin Steinberg, “Two Puzzles.” Key passages include E3p9s, E3p39s, and E4p8; but also, E4p14, E4p19, E4p64.

19 Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Antonio R. Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things: Life, Feeling, and the Making of Cultures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018), ch. 7. In Damasio's case, the resemblance to Spinoza is not at all coincidental, since he explicitly cites Spinoza as a forerunner.

in his theory. Once again, according to Spinoza, all ideas have a degree of affirmative or doxastic power. Affects are a subset of ideas, and as such affirm some particular intentional object; but they also affirm a change in one's power of acting or striving (E3 general definition of the affects/G II 203–4) and thus have a (positive or negative) valence corresponding to the (perceived) impact on one's striving. The power or intensity of an affect is determined not only by the doxastic power of the idea of the intentional object (e.g., the more steadily and forcefully I affirm that the object of my joy exists or will exist, the stronger the joy will be *ceteris paribus*), but also by the degree to which the change in one's power of acting is (perceived as) augmentative or diminishing. Consequently, moderate confidence about a very exciting opportunity might yield a stronger joy than full confidence in a much less appealing, but still good, prospect.

The power of this affect determines, in turn, how one thinks and acts. So, while philosophers and non-philosophers alike often distinguish between one's emotional responses to something, one's evaluations of the thing, and one's desires or motivations in relation to the thing, Spinoza thinks that affect (or emotion) itself constitutes the evaluation and fixes one's desires.

There are several attractive features to the account of motivation as fixed by the power of one's affects. For one thing, it implies that intentional actions reflect one's strongest desires at the decisive moment, a thesis that has struck many as patently, maybe even trivially, true.²⁰ Second, by maintaining that evaluative judgments are themselves affects, Spinoza is able to ground another widely-held thesis, namely the view that evaluative judgments are intrinsically motivational (i.e., the thesis of motivational internalism). Third, by maintaining that reason is itself affective, he defuses the problem of how reason motivates in a way that avoids the Scylla of the "combat" model (above), which pits reason against appetite without explaining how these distinct motivational sources interact, and the Charybdis of Humean separatism, which struggles to explain why desires or passions are responsive to reason or cognitive change. And, finally, the claim that reason is affective accords well with neuroscientific research showing that those who suffer from affective deficits suffer from corresponding deficits in practical reason.²¹

From this brief sketch we see that Spinoza's accounts of belief-formation, affect, and motivation each receive some empirical and philosophical support. Moreover, Spinoza *systematizes* these individually credible claims into a general theory of how the mind works. Moreover, in addition to what has already been noted, Spinoza's dynamic theory of mind predicts and explains the following psychological phenomena: (1) merely imagining something ('making believe') can prompt belief-like outputs (e.g., affects, inferences, and behaviors);²² (2) beliefs—including evaluative judgments—will tend to endure even after they are debunked or even when they conflict with

20 See Donald Davidson, following G.E.M. Anscombe and Stuart Hampshire, calls the following similar thesis a "natural assumption": "If an agent wants to do x more than he wants to do y and he believes himself free to do either x or y, then he will intentionally do x if he does either x or y intentionally." Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 23.

21 See Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994) and Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

22 Kendall L. Walton, "Fearing Fictions," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 1 (1978); Tamar S. Gendler, "On the Relation Between Pretense and Belief," in *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*, ed. Matthew Kieran and Dominic Lopes (London: Routledge, 2003), 125–141.

perceived evidence;²³ (3) conflicting ideas provoke dissonance, which we seek to reduce;²⁴ (4) we are epistemically conservative, tending to preserve our antecedent beliefs, making us prone to confirmation bias, identity protection, and intolerance.²⁵ This is just a very partial list of the phenomena that Spinoza's dynamic theory of the mind could explain.

Let me conclude by pointing to some of the normative implications of this account. Spinoza can be seen as a kind of virtue ethicist who thinks that one's flourishing consists in clarifying or redirecting one's mind. The dynamic theory of mind entails that the project of clarifying or redirecting the mind will be exceedingly difficult. It is not enough to form adequate ideas or to grasp things as they are; these adequate ideas must acquire sufficient *affective* power to direct one's mind and overpower the passions by which we are often led. Coming to appreciate the underlying affective dynamics behind our bondage to the passions is a crucial step in overcoming it (see E4p17s), since only once we have acknowledged that our beliefs and evaluations are fixed by the power of ideas—and not a matter of what we reflectively endorse or what we think that we have reason to believe—will we be able to adopt targeted remedies for dislodging or diminishing the power of wayward beliefs and recalcitrant passions (see the “remedies” described in the first half of *Ethics* 5).

If something like the dynamic theory of mind is right, belief-revision and moral reform can only be achieved through the modification of the relative power of ideas, which itself will typically require a kind of mental reconditioning. And, as Spinoza himself appreciated, overcoming prejudices, misguided beliefs, and stubborn emotions requires more than individualist (meta-cognitive) remedies or strategies: it requires the establishment of socio-political institutions or structures that are liberating, and not merely restrictive or disciplinary, in function.²⁶ For a first pass at articulating these liberating institutions, one could do worse than look to Spinoza's own political writings, even if there are significant gaps in and deficiencies with his own analysis.²⁷ How far we should follow Spinoza's own analysis is bound to give rise to debate. But that's a debate that we should have, just as we should debate the merits of his moral psychology.

I've indicated above that I think that Spinoza gives us an intriguing and not-obviously-implausible theory of cognition and motivation that deviates from traditional folk psychology in some appealing ways. Whether or not we should subscribe to something like it depends on how well

23 See E5a1; Gilbert Harman, “Positive Versus Negative Undermining in Belief Revision,” *Noûs* 18, no. 1 (1984); Mandelbaum, “Thinking.”

24 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957); Claude M. Steele, “The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Volume 21, Social Psychological Studies of the Self: Perspectives and Programs*, ed. Leonard Berkowitz (San Diego: Academic Press, 1988), 261–302. See E5a1 and E3p5.

25 See Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions,” *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (2010): 303–330. doi: [10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2); Dan M. Kahan, “Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection,” *Judgement and Decision Making* 8, no. 4 (2013): 407–424; Dan M. Kahan, “Misconceptions, Misinformation, and the Logic of Identity-Protective Cognition,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2017). URL: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2973067. For more on Spinoza and the psychology of intolerance, see Justin Steinberg, ““Stop Being So Judgemental!”: A Spinozist Model of Personal Tolerance,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Toleration*, ed. Mitja Sardoc (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1077–1093.

26 For a similar observation, see Huebner, “Troubles.”

27 For my discussion of this, see Justin Steinberg, *Spinoza's Political Psychology: The Taming of Fortune and Fear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chs 6–8.

it holds up to sustained analysis. With the hope of encouraging more work in this direction, I say: Spinozists of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your methodological chains.

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