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Spinoza's Appropriation of the Medieval *Being-Thing* Distinction

Stephen H. Daniel*

Abstract

From his earliest writings we learn that, for Spinoza, God is not some identifiable thing (*res*) but is rather the ultimate activity or being (*ens*) by which all things are identified and differentiated. In this way Spinoza shifts the focus of the meaning of “substance” from being something that *has* characteristics to the activity whereby all things come to express characteristics. Like Piero Di Vona, I suggest that this *ens-res* distinction has its origin in Avicenna and is developed by Aquinas, Suárez, and Heereboord. Unlike Di Vona, I argue that Spinoza's distinction of substance, attribute, and mode parallels Suárez's distinction between (1) *ens-as-noun* (*τὸ εἶναι*), (2) *ens-as-participle*, and (3) *res*, in that for both Suárez and Spinoza, the distinction between *ens-as-a-noun* and things (*res*) is intelligible only in terms of *ens* as the principle by which things are identified. Since that principle is not itself a thing but rather the process by which things are differentiated from one another in virtue of their attributes, I propose that “substance” for Spinoza is best described as the *activity* by which all that exists comes to be. I conclude that the attempt to provide subjectivist or objectivist interpretations of attributes inevitably misses the point that Spinoza makes in describing God as the source of existence by treating substance as some *thing* rather than the activity or being (*ens*) in terms of which all things are intelligible.

Keywords: Spinoza, Suárez, Heereboord, being, thing, attribute, substance

1. The Context of the *Ens-Res* Distinction

In 1661 Spinoza tells Henry Oldenburg that by “God” he means “Being, consisting of infinite attributes, each of which is infinite” (*Ens, constans infinitis attributis, quorum unumquodque est*

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infinitum).¹ His *Ethics* definition of God as “absolutely infinite being, i.e., substance consisting of infinite attributes” (*ens absolute infinitum, hoc est, substantiam constantem infinitis attributis*) repeats that idea.² But the remark in his letter to Oldenburg tellingly includes a comma after *Ens*, indicating (contrary to most translations) that God is not *a* being who has infinite attributes but rather Activity itself expressed in an infinite number of ways. This is the same point he makes in the *Ethics*. Indeed, the remark in the *Ethics* only makes clearer his claim that in referring to God as “substance,” he thinks of God not as a thing (*res*) at all—even a thing with infinite attributes—but as the Activity or Being (*Ens*) of all things.

The distinction between *being* (*ens*) and *thing* (*res*) has often been overlooked by commentators who assume that things are logically prior to their activities. But beginning with Avicenna (d. 1037), certain philosophers argue that what distinguishes (and thus identifies) a thing is its activities. For them, it is the engagement in certain activities that makes a substance be what it is. That, I propose, is the central insight of Spinoza’s doctrine of God, and it is this doctrine that I want to examine. In particular, I hope to show that by describing God as the activity by which all things exist, Spinoza not only draws on insights from Avicenna, Maimonides, Aquinas, and Heereboord, but also shifts the discussion of God in early modern philosophy from characterizing God’s attributes as either objective or subjective expressions of his nature to revealing how God’s engagement in and with the world is to be understood centrally in terms of his attributes.

To see just how central this point of referring to God as *Ens* is, we need to attend to the ways in which Spinoza contrasts *ens* (being) with *res* (thing). Such a contrast indicates that it is inappropriate to consider God as a “thing” (*res*), for a thing has an identity in virtue of its being differentiated from other things. Such a differentiation is not something for which the thing is responsible, for apart from the differentiation, there is no thing.

Indeed, by alluding to the distinction between *ens* and *res*—a distinction with which thinkers of the period would have been familiar because of positions developed by Avicenna, Maimonides, Aquinas, Crescas, Suárez, and Heereboord—Spinoza emphasizes how “being” (*ens*) is the process or activity whereby a “thing” (*res*) is produced. The activity is not itself a thing but is rather simply the means by which things are identified and differentiated from one another. Being (*ens*) is thus not the activity *of* a thing, for such a thing would itself have to be explained in terms of the activity of yet another thing *ad infinitum*.

When Spinoza says to Oldenburg that God is Being, then, he does not mean that God is a *thing* with infinite attributes, for such a thing would itself be the *result* of some activity and not the activity itself. And in those instances when he speaks of God as *res*—for example, where he says that God is a “thinking thing [*res cogitans*]” (E2p1)—his focus is not on God’s being a thing as such but on how nothing can exist or be intelligible apart from its expressing God’s nature in terms of some attribute (e.g., thought).³ No doubt, no particular thing can be understood other than as an expression

1 See Spinoza to Oldenburg, 21 September 1661, Ep 2, G IV 7/C I 165.

2 E1def6/G II 45.

3 For how “being” (*ens*) and “thing” (*res*) have been interpreted as interchangeable, see Michael Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind–Body Problem in Spinoza* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 198n46; Martin Lin, “Spinoza’s Arguments for the Existence of God,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75 (2007), 271, 276; Steven Nadler, “‘Whatever Is, Is in God’: Substance and Things in Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” in *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. Charlie Huenemann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008),

of some attribute, so we might be tempted to speak about God as some kind of thing. But for Spinoza, to think that God is a thing or to imagine that the concept of “things” includes substance would be to treat God as a mode (i.e., as the object of some already determinate activity). So, Spinoza prefers to speak of God as *ens absolute infinitum* (E1def6, E1p11d) rather than as a thing (*res*).⁴

It is likely that Spinoza learned of the *ens-res* distinction from his reading of Maimonides, Crescas, and Heereboord. From Maimonides and Crescas he would have learned how Avicenna appeals to the distinction between a being or “existent” (*mawjūd*) and a thing (*shay'*) to argue that, because God does not have an essence distinct from his existence, he is an activity or *being* without being a *thing*.⁵ From Heereboord Spinoza would have learned how Aquinas and Suárez draw on the Latinized Avicenna to distinguish between existence (i.e., the activity of being) and essence (i.e., being a certain thing). Indeed, for Heereboord, the distinction between *esse existentiae* and *esse essentiae* explicitly allows us to think of the being of an activity without necessarily thinking of it as an existing *thing* (even an absolutely perfect thing), for its identity as that thing seemingly would still have to be designated by another thing.⁶ To avoid having to draw such a conclusion, Spinoza assumes that the *activity* by which a thing is itself does not have to have an essence. That is, the act of being (*ens*) by which a thing (*res*) comes to be need not be any thing at all but rather simply the activity by which the thing comes to be. As such, the contrast between *ens* and *res* is not one between what is absolutely perfect and what is finite, for such a contrast still focuses on the differentiation

54n; Francesca di Poppa, “Spinoza’s Concept of Substance and Attribute: A Reading of the *Short Treatise*,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17 (2009), 937; Yitzhak Melamed, “Spinoza’s Metaphysics of Thought: Parallelisms and the Multifaceted Structure of Ideas,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86 (2013), 640n; Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 179–181; and Pina Totaro, “Res in Spinoza,” *Quaestio* 18 (2018), 226.

- 4 Melamed (*Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 180) claims that Spinoza mentions God as *res* elsewhere in the *Ethics*; but in none of those places (E1p14c2, E2def1, E2p5, E2p9d) does Spinoza actually say that God is a thing—only that God as *cause of an object* can be considered a thing.
- 5 Cf. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, tr. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 22–32 (secs. 1.5–6). See Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 152–160; Amos Bertolacci, “The Distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna’s Metaphysics: The Text and Its Context,” in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion*, ed. Felicitas Opwis and David Reisman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 257–288, especially 276–277; Therese-Anne Druart, “‘Shay’ or Res as Concomitant of ‘Being’ in Avicenna,” *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 12 (2001), 130–135; John F. Whipple, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 36–50; and Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 86–90. On God as existence without essence, see Harry A. Wolfson, “Crescas on the Problem of Divine Attributes,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, new series 7 (1916), 190–191, 205, 209; Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 2 vols. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 1: 121–130, 198; and Yitzhak Melamed, “Spinoza’s Deification of Existence,” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 6 (2012), 75–84, 102–103.
- 6 See Piero Di Vona, *Studi sull’Ontologia di Spinoza. Parte I* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1960), 177, 191; and Piero Di Vona, *Studi sull’Ontologia di Spinoza. Parte II* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1969), 11–13, 113–116. Di Vona focuses on the scholastic sources of Spinoza’s distinction of *ens* and *res* and discusses Maimonides and Crescas primarily in regard to Spinoza’s determinism (159–166).

of objects rather than on how the active process of differentiation is different from the things differentiated.⁷

For Aquinas, these Avicennian distinctions highlight how *things* are differentiated by their essences. But this is markedly different from the activities (or *beings*) by which essences are differentiated in terms of their ways of existing. As Aquinas puts it:

We can find nothing that can be said of every being [*ente*] affirmatively and absolutely except for the essence by which it is said to be [*esse*]. In this way, according to the principles of Avicenna's Metaphysics, the term "thing" [*res*] differs from "being" because "being" [*ens*] is taken from the act of being [*actu essendi*], whereas "thing" expresses the quiddity or essence of the being [*entis*].⁸

In Aquinas' view, all *beings* as activities of being share the same essence with one another, in that their *being* constitutes their existence. But as *particular* beings—in Spinoza's terms, modes—each thing (*res*) expresses a certain kind of existence that for Aquinas indicates how the *act of being* (*ens*) by which a thing is that thing (*res*) is (at least in thought) prior to *res*.

Like Aquinas, Suárez acknowledges that *res* and *ens* are commonly used as synonyms, but he revises Aquinas' point by noting that *res* and *ens* cannot be linked "in any manner":

For if we want to distinguish *res* and *ens* as strictly as D. Thomas does following Avicenna, such that the quiddity of a thing [*res*] prescinds from actual existence and signifies merely the meaning of the thing [*res*] and not the existence of an actually existing being [*ens*], then *res* will not signify something that happens to *ens* but will be the predication of a quiddity. More significantly, *ens* will signify something other than essence, at least in regard to creatures. At the same time, *ens* cannot be called an attribute of a *res*, for existence is not a predicate of an existing creature.⁹

Suárez's point—something that Spinoza endorses in Elp25 when he says that God is the efficient cause of both the existence and the essence of things—is that existence is not simply added onto some determinate essence; it is rather the designation of a thing precisely as that which cannot exist or be conceived apart from the activity in terms of which it is identified as that particular existence.

7 Cf. Henri Krop, "Esse," in *The Continuum Companion to Spinoza*, eds. Wiep Van Bunge, Henri Krop, Piet Steenbakkers, and Jeroen van de Ven (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 208; and Totaro, "Res in Spinoza," 233.

8 Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate: Truth, Questions 1–9*, tr. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), q. 1, a. 1 (Leon. 22.1.5), 6. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros sententiarum*, 4 vols., eds. Pierre Mandonnet and Maria F. Moos (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1929–1947), *Scriptum, I Sententiae* d. 25.1.4, sol., and *II Sententiae* d. 37.1.1, sol. Cf. Jan A. Aertsen, "Avicenna's Doctrine of the Primary Notions and its Impact on Medieval Philosophy," in *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages*, eds. Wim Raven and Anna Akasoy (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 29–30; and Daniel De Haan, "A Mereological Construal of the Primary Notions *Being* and *Thing* in Avicenna and Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 88 (2014), 352–355. Cf. Totaro, "Res in Spinoza," 226n16.

9 Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, III.2.4, in *Opera Omnia* (1858), vols. 25–26, ed. Charles Berton (reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), hereafter abbreviated 'DM'.

The existence of a temporal thing is thus different from the a-temporal principle that accounts for its existence. Indeed, the distinction between temporal existence and eternity is expressed in (1) Suárez's contrast between *ens* as a participle and *ens* as a noun (*DM* II.4.3) and (2) his claim that the predication of something's being "one" or a unity, identifies it as something that signifies only the negation of another (*DM* IV.1.12; IV.2.6).¹⁰

In Spinoza's hands, the distinction between *ens* and *res* appears as the contrast between *natura naturans* (God and his attributes, i.e., creative activity) and *natura naturata* (the universe of modes) (E1p29s). That is, (1) *ens* the noun (substance, *τὸ esse*) and (2) *ens* the participle (the particular attribute or *activity* in terms of which things exist) is contrasted with (3) the way in which things (*res*) exist specifically as modes. In the Dutch *Short Treatise* (KV), Spinoza makes this tri-partite distinction explicit when he appeals to the vocabulary of *wezen* (being), *zaaken* (the participial principles that make things real), and *dingen* (the things that are identified by means of such principles). There he writes:

We have already seen that the attributes (or as others call them substances) are real things [*zaaken*], or to put it better or more properly, a being [*wezen*] existing through itself; and that this being therefore makes itself known through itself. We see that other things [*dingen*] are only modes of those attributes, and without them can neither exist nor be understood.¹¹

The attributes that account for the intelligibility and existence of things (*dingen*) are not things themselves but are rather the identification of those things as intelligible. Considered in itself, such identification is *wezen* (being itself, *τὸ esse*); but to the extent that anything is identified as one kind of thing or another, it is "realized" as an effect of real things (*zaaken*).¹²

This *Short Treatise* account parallels Suárez's distinction between (1) *ens*–as–noun, (2) *ens*–as–participle, and (3) *res*, and Spinoza's *Ethics* distinction between (1) substance, (2) attribute, and (3) mode. Indeed, for Suárez the distinction between *ens* as noun (*ens ipsum*, *τὸ esse*) and things

10 On *ens* as a participle and *ens* as a noun, see Adrian Heereboord, *Meletemata Philosophica* (Amsterdam: John Ravestein, 1665), 179 (col 2)–180 (col 1); and Di Vona, *Parte I*, 257. On how *ens* as a unity signifies a negation, see Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy*, 601–615. Cf. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines (2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1, 57: "God's unity is not an element superadded, but he is one without possessing the attribute of unity."

11 *Korte Verhandelng* I.vii (G I 46/C I 90). My translation of *zaaken* as "real things" draws on Shirley's similar rendering of *zaken* (the modern spelling) in KV I.vi/G I 42. It also highlights the point Spinoza makes in KV I.ii Dialogue 2 (G I 34), that God can be said to produce things (*dingen*) immediately by virtue of principles that make those things real: "In order to make things [*dingen*] exist, some things [*zaaken*] are required to produce the thing, and others are required for it to be produced" (C I 79). *Zaken* are thus *beings* in terms of which things (*dingen*) are conceived as specific kinds of existences: that is why *zaken* are properly called *attributes* of substance. In this way, Spinoza's distinction between *wezen*, *zaaken*, and *dingen* is intended to indicate how the indeterminate activity of being (*esse*) is expressed through activities that are reflexively identified as real causes of particular things.

12 See KV II.i (G I 19): God is "a being [*wezen*] of which all, or infinite, attributes are predicated." See also KV I.ii Dialogue 1 (G I 29). In this way, acts of being (*zaken*, *entia*) in terms of which things are real(ized) and intelligible are distinct from the things (*dingen*, *res*) they cause. That is why Spinoza writes, "if we use our intellect well in the knowledge of things [*zaaken*], we must know them in their causes" (KV II.v/G I 64/C I 107), for things understood in terms of their causes are *zaaken*, not *dingen*.

(*res*) is intelligible only in terms of *ens* as participle; but as with Spinoza, that does not mean that *ens* as participle is a specific thing or being.¹³ Rather, *ens* as participle—or in Spinoza’s terms, an attribute—is a principle by which a thing exists or is conceived to be this or that thing. But the principle does not have its own intelligibility, for that would assume that it has an essence rather than being the cause of something’s having an essence, which in turn would require an explanation for why “it” is the way it is. That would amount to confusing *ens* with *res*.¹⁴

My point in all this is to show how Spinoza describes substance and its attributes as beings (*entia*) but not things (*res*). Because they are beings, substance and its attributes are not things for which we need explanations; they are the principles by which the existence and the intelligibility of things are explained in the first place. This does not mean, though, that substance and attributes are brute facts or simply the kind of things that are inexplicable. Instead, it means that as principles that *account for* existence and intelligibility, they are not the kinds of things that are combinable into unities nor are they enumerable (even infinitely).

2. God Is *Ens*, not *Res*

For Spinoza, then, a substance can have infinite attributes without having an infinite *number* of attributes, because an attribute is not a countable or enumerable thing (*res*). Instead, an attribute identifies a substance as having a specific essence. As such, an attribute is how a substance and its modes (i.e., *things*) are intelligible in virtue of having been conceived in a certain way, but an attribute is not some thing to which substance or modes can be contrasted. As Spinoza tells John Hudde, “since God’s nature does not consist in a certain kind of being [*ens*] but in being [*Ens*] that is absolutely indeterminate, his nature also requires all that which perfectly expresses being itself [*τὸ esse*], since otherwise his nature would be determinate and deficient.”¹⁵ As the absolutely indeterminate cause of whatever has a specific or determinate essence, God is the *activity* that differentiates all things (*res*) with essences from one another; but he cannot be identified or differentiated as a distinctive being (*ens*) because he is the undifferentiated principle of all differentiation.¹⁶ In this way, as *τὸ esse*, God is not a thing at all.¹⁷ So, even to speak of God as a

13 See Spinoza to Tschirnhaus through Schuller, 29 July 1675, Ep 64 (G IV 277/S 918/C II 438). Cf. Samuel Newlands, “Thinking, Conceiving, and Idealism in Spinoza,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 94 (2012): 44–46.

14 It is not my intent to examine the differences between Thomistic, Suárezian, or Heereboordian (Scotistic) answers to the essence–existence distinction. It is only to indicate how certain features in their accounts clarify Spinoza’s view.

15 Spinoza to John Hudde, June 1666, Ep 36, G IV 185/C II 30; *Complete Works*, ed. Michael Morgan, tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 859. See Di Vona, *Parte II*, 211–213; Shannon Dea, “The Infinite and the Indeterminate in Spinoza,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 50 (2011), 604, 612–613; and Steven Parchment, “The God/Attribute Distinction in Spinoza’s Metaphysics: A Defense of Causal Objectivism,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 13 (1996): 63–64.

16 Cf. Spinoza, *Opere*, ed. by Filippo Mignini and Omero Proietti (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), xxi.

17 Robert Schnepf, *Metaphysik im ersten Teil der Ethik Spinozas* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996), 148 n59 and 151–154, notes that we should identify *ens* and substance with one another. But by expanding the meaning of *res* to include whatever is cognizable (including *ens*), he undermines Spinoza’s careful distinction between *ens* and *res*.

determinate activity is to adopt the derivative vocabulary of things—which, of course, is already to think of such activity with a specificity that is thoroughly inappropriate.

That is why, when Spinoza insists in E1p25 that God is the efficient cause of the existence *and* essence of things, he does not assume that God has a specific essence other than being the power “by which he and all things are and act” (E1p34d/G II 77). In other words, God is “the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself” (E1p25s), for he is the activity by means of which all things are differentiated in virtue of what they do.

Since God is the activity of identification and differentiation itself, it is thus misleading to say that Spinoza’s definition of essence—“that which, being given, the thing (*res*) is also necessarily posited” (E2def2/G II 84)—applies to the “essence” of God or his attributes, for God does not himself have a *specific* essence other than in the derivative terms in which the existence of things is conceivable.¹⁸ Indeed, if God had such an essence, he would have it in virtue of some other thing, and that other thing would have its essence in virtue of something else—thus setting up an infinite regress.

In referring to God’s attributes, we thus refer only to what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting his essence (E1def4). In this way, when we speak of God, we make no claim about his essence as such or even whether he has an essence (other than in a derivative sense), for the activity by which we would identify such an essence would have to be understood in some way other than in terms of the activity.

Accordingly, the divine activity of *positing* anything is simply being itself (*τὸ εἶναι*). It is also why the cause of a determinate thing (*res*) is not another thing but rather the activity or being (*ens*) in terms of which it is understood as that determinate thing. As the cause of a thing, such a being (*ens*) is identifiable only in virtue of undifferentiated causal activity. That is why Spinoza tells Hudde that “God is being [*Deus est ens*] which is indeterminate in essence and omnipotent absolutely and not merely in a particular respect” (Ep 36, G IV 186/S 859/C II 30). Even on those rare occasions when Spinoza calls God *res cogitans* or *res extensa* (E2p1, E2p2), he does not mean that God is a particular thinking or extended *thing* at all, for that would mean that God is a thing whose essence or nature is differentiated by his unique existence. But God’s existence is *not* differentiated by his essence, so he is not *one* being or one thing in *any* sense, because:

a thing [*res*] can be called one or single only in respect of its existence, not of its essence [...]. Now since the existence of God is his very essence, and since we can form no universal idea of his essence, it is certain that he who calls God one or single has no true idea of God, or is speaking of him very improperly.¹⁹

18 Cf. Michael Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Substance Monism,” in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, ed. Olli I. Koistinen and John I. Biro (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19; Sherry Deveaux, “The Divine Essence and the Conception of God in Spinoza,” *Synthese* 135 (2003): 329–338; and Sherry Deveaux, *The Role of God in Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 63–64. I am here suggesting that the definition of essence at E2def2—“to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is also necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is also necessarily taken away”—applies to *things* (E2 p7) but not to *beings*.

19 Spinoza to Jarig Jelles, 2 June 1674, Ep 50 (G IV 239–240/S 892/C II 406). Also see E1p20d, and CM I.6 (G I 245–246/S 186–187/C I 311–312). Cf. Mogens Laerke, “Spinoza’s Monism: What Monism?” in *Spinoza on Monism*, ed. Philip Goff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 249–250.

In other words, God's existence (i.e., *esse ipsum*, activity itself) identifies his essence (E1p20d), but he is not differentiated from other things in virtue of his existence, for that would suggest that God's existence is somehow different from existence itself. When we say, then, that God is a thinking or extended thing (*res*), what we mean is that insofar as his essence is expressed in "a certain and determinate way"—that is, in terms of existence—he must be understood in terms of an attribute (E2p1d/G II 86). Indeed, it is only in terms of the expression of that attribute as a determinate (and thus derivative) thing that God is said to be a thinking or extended thing (*res*). So, despite the fact that God's activity of being (i.e., his existence) is the basis for the existence of all else that can be thought in terms of essence, he himself cannot be thought of as having an essence apart from that activity.

3. The Interchangeability of Substance and Attributes

That Spinoza thinks of substance and its attributes as interchangeable is apparent when he speaks of substances "or what is the same, their attributes" (E1p4d/G II 47–48; see also E1p19, E1p20c, E1p29s). As Curley notes, evidence of this interchangeability occurs as early as 1661, when Spinoza tells Oldenburg that, "by attribute I understand whatever is conceived through itself and in itself, so that its concept does not involve the concept of another thing."²⁰ A month later he writes, "by substance I understand what is conceived through itself and in itself, i.e., that whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing."²¹ And to Simon de Vries he writes in 1663:

By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing. I understand the same by attribute, except that it is called attribute in relation to the intellect, which attributes a certain such nature to substance.²²

My point in citing these passages is to indicate how, for Spinoza, conceiving of a substance or its attributes does not involve conceiving of anything else. But to conceive of a substance or its attributes, we have to conceive of one or the other—that is, we have to conceive of one in terms of the other. "Substance" and "attribute" are interchangeable because a substance can be conceived only in terms of a certain nature or essence, which itself is intelligible only as an attribute. An attribute, in turn, can be conceived only as the activity by means of which a substance is identified as having a certain nature.²³ This is not to say that an attribute *has* a nature or essence. Rather, as that in terms of which

20 Spinoza to Oldenburg, Sept 1661, Ep 2 (G IV 7/C I 165). For Curley's comment, see C I 165n4.

21 Spinoza to Oldenburg, Oct 1661, Ep 4 (G IV 13/C I 171).

22 Spinoza to de Vries, March 1663, Ep 9 (G IV 46/C I 195). See also Spinoza, KV I.7 (G I 44/C I 88n) and AppIp3 (G I 115/C I 151). Cf. A. D. Smith, "Spinoza, Gueroult, and Substance," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88 (2014): 671.

23 On Spinoza's interchangeable use of substance and attribute, see Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza: Dieu* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968), 426–427; and Melamed, "Glimpse," 275. On his interchangeable use of "essence" and "nature," cf. John P. Carriero, "On the Relationship between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33 (1995): 252; and Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 50–51.

things are intelligible, an attribute is that in terms of which a thing exists and is conceived as that particular kind of thing.

It is not surprising, then, that Spinoza refers to the essence of a *thing* (*res*) as “that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived” (E2def2) to highlight how nothing can exist apart from its being conceivable in terms of some attribute. But unlike things, a substance and its attributes can neither be nor be conceived in terms of anything else, because they are the principles in terms of which things are said to exist and be conceivable.

As I have suggested, this way of thinking about attributes as principles (i.e., *beings*) by which things (*res*) are understood is presented in Spinoza’s *Cogitata Metaphysica* in terms of the act of being (*esse*) by which things are said to exist and be differentiated.²⁴ But since the *esse* of modes is intelligible only in terms of specific attributes, and attributes are only attributes of a substance, then the *esse* of the existence and essence of things can be properly described only in terms of God and his attributes and not in terms of any thing (*res*).²⁵

In the *Ethics*, the scholastic vocabulary promoted by Heereboord (e.g., *esse essentiae*, *esse existentiae*) is put aside, but Spinoza makes the same point. By insisting that “in nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” (E1p5/G II 48), he insists that the identity of a substance consists in nothing other than its attributes. So “although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still cannot infer from that that they constitute two beings [*entia*], or two different substances” (E1p10s/G II 52), for as principles of distinction, attributes cannot themselves be *distinct* beings (*entia*) or substances—especially if both beings and substances are properly understood as principles of identification and differentiation. That is how, as the identification of a substance in terms of a certain nature or essence, “each [attribute] expresses the reality or being [*esse*] of substance” (E1p10s) in a way that makes things (*res*) intelligible without “itself” being understood as having an identity.²⁶

The being (*esse*) of a thing (*res*) can thus be distinguished in terms of its essence and existence, but the being (*esse*) of beings (*entia*)—substance and its attributes, that is, the activity of identifying and differentiating beings—cannot, because it constitutes their essence. Accordingly, it is of the essence of substance to be and to express the existence of all things in determinate, intelligible ways.²⁷ That is why Spinoza tells de Vries, “God’s existence and his intellect are not distinguished

24 See CM I.2/G I 238/C I 304. On Heereboord and Spinoza, see Di Vona, *Parte I*, 179–180, 259; and Di Vona, *Parte II*, 11.

25 The *Cogitata Metaphysica* is thus consistent with Spinoza’s later work. Cf. Melamed, “Glimpse,” 274–278; and Yitzhak Melamed, “The Building Blocks of Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance, Attributes, and Modes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 91–94.

26 On “expression,” cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* [1968], tr. Martin Joughlin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 42–49; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 89; Deveaux, *God*, 69–71; and Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Substance,” 20–21. For my purposes, “expresses” simply means “constitutes and thus identifies.”

27 Cf. Charles Jarrett, “Spinoza’s Distinction between Essence and Existence,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2001), 245. On how Spinoza draws on Maimonides on this point, see Melamed, “Spinoza’s Deification,” 75–80, 87–93.

from his essence,” and “the existence of the attributes does not differ from their essence,”²⁸ for the beings (*entia*) in terms of which things exist constitute the intelligibility (i.e., essence) of those things but are not the things (*res*) themselves.

The concept of a substance, like that of an attribute, thus does not involve the concept of another thing, for substance and attributes are not things (*res*) that are intelligible in terms of other things; they are rather the causes of the existence and intelligibility of things. This means that the celebrated dispute about whether the E1def4/G II 45 definition of an attribute (“what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence”) is a subjectivist *invention* of the intellect or an objectivist *discovery* of a feature in a substance is beside the point, because talk of substance and attributes is not about the definition of some *thing*.²⁹ Indeed, substance cannot be conceived *as if* it has a certain identity which the intellect perceives (as the “subjectivist” interpretation of attributes suggests), for it is what accounts for existence and identity without itself existing in a certain way.³⁰ Furthermore, since substance is intelligibility itself, it makes no sense to ask what makes substance intelligible, for that would be like asking what makes intelligibility intelligible.

The objectivist interpretation of attributes is likewise misleading, in that the differentiation of attributes is not based on any essential differences in substance. Again, the key here lies in focusing on how substance is not a thing *at all* but rather the activity by which everything becomes intelligible in its own way (i.e., in terms of its attributes). The question of why there are multiple attributes is thus not resolved by thinking of them as different ways of perceiving substance, or by thinking of each attribute as characterizing its own substance, but by thinking of an attribute simply as what makes substance intelligible.

So, in the same way that no substance can be conceived or exist apart from its essence, no essence can exist or be conceived apart from its being expressed by an attribute (E1def6). That is why “each attribute of a substance expresses the reality or being [*realitatem sive esse*] of a substance” (E1p10s). And since “each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself” (E1p10), no attribute of a substance is conceivable in relation to any other attribute, and no substance is conceivable in relation to another substance (E1p14d).

The supposed difficulty created by the concept of attributes—namely, as being either ways of thinking about substance or ways in which substance is already intelligible—is overcome by noting how the distinction between *ens* and *res* shifts attention away from thinking about substance as if it were a thing to the process by which things are identified and related. Indeed, the fundamental distinction between a “being” and a “thing” to which Spinoza draws our attention indicates how

28 Spinoza to de Vries, March (?) 1663, Ep 10 (G IV 47/C I 196). Cf. Pierre Macherey, “The Problem of the Attributes,” in *The New Spinoza*, tr. Ted Stolze and ed. Warren Montag (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 75.

29 On the subjectivist–objectivist ways of reading Spinoza, see Wolfson, *Spinoza*, 1: 146–157; Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 428–461; and Francis S. Haserot, “Spinoza’s Definition of Attribute,” *Philosophical Review* 62 (1953): 507–512.

30 Cf. Alan Donagan, “Essence and the Distinction of Attributes in Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 164–181; Parchment, “God/Attribute,” 55–72; Thomas M. Lennon, “The Rationalist Conception of Substance,” in *A Companion to Rationalism*, ed. Alan Nelson (New York: Blackwell, 2005), 19–27; Deveaux, *God*, 5–6, 39–41; Della Rocca, “Substance Monism,” 18; and Noa Shein, “The False Dichotomy between Objective and Subjective Interpretations of Spinoza’s Theory of Attributes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17 (2009), 509–511, 525.

substance and attributes should not be understood as things at all. That is why any effort to compare the activity by which something is identified and differentiated with the product of that activity risks objectifying that activity in a way that threatens the creativity of substance.

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The Universal Nature of a Spinozistic Substance

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Abstract

There is a longstanding alliance between rationalism and realism concerning universals. Spinoza does not disrupt that alliance. The nature of a Spinozistic substance, after all, is a universal. That is what I argue here. My central point is that a realist conception of universals is a key presumption behind Spinoza's case for substance monism, a view historically recognized as a natural outgrowth of realism's toleration of strict identity in diversity. After defending my central point (and, in addition, the secondary point that Spinoza is likely cognizant of this presumption), I respond to two concerns. First, I explain how the nature of a Spinozistic substance is a universal even though there can be only one instance of that nature. Second, I explain how Spinoza's infamous rejection of universals does not contradict the fact that the nature of a substance is a universal.

Keywords: Spinoza, Attributes, Properties, Universals, Tropes, Realism, Antirealism, Nominalism, Monism

1. Introductory Remarks

The status of universals in Spinoza's ontology has been a topic of disagreement over the centuries. Considering Spinoza's characterization of universals as abstract figments of the imagination,¹ some commentators have held that Spinoza is an antirealist concerning universals.² On the other hand,

- 1 See TIE 19.3/G II 10 lines 16-19, TIE 76/G II 29 lines 5-15, TIE 93/G II 34 lines 15-22, and TIE 99-100/G II 36 lines 6-29; KV 1.6/G I 43 lines 7-8, KV 1.10/G I 50, KV 2.16.3a/G I 81 lines 18-19, and KV 2.16.4/G I 82 line 5ff; CM 1.1/G I 235 lines 10-30; CM 2.7/G I 263 lines 5-9; E1app, E2p40s1, E2p49s/G II 135 lines 22-23, E4pref/G II 207, and E4p62s/G II 257 line 28; Ep. 2/G IV 19 lines 10-20.
- 2 For a thorough list of commentators who have held that Spinoza is an antirealist, see Michael A. Istvan Jr., *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals: A Study and Research Guide* (Diss. Texas A&M University, 2015), ch.1.2 and esp. Appendix D. Here is a clear expression of the interpretation that, in Pollock's more dramatic words, Spinoza is "the downright enemy of [...] universals" (Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy* (New York: American Scholar Publications, 1966), 141):

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and considering Spinoza's many statements about how distinct things can be strictly identical in some respect (as in when he says that one and the same essence is equally in each individual with that essence, such that each would be destroyed were the essence of just one destroyed³), other commentators have held that Spinoza is a realist.⁴

A few commentators, in light of such textual and scholarly tensions, conclude that Spinoza contradicts himself when it comes to the status of universals.⁵ My position, as I argue in this paper, is that Spinoza does not contradict himself: Spinoza is a consistent realist concerning universals. Unlike more typical approaches, which center around whether Spinoza allows for universal species essences in the realm of dependent entities, I restrict my focus to the foundational level of Spinoza's ontology. That is, I focus on a substance in its absolute nature (the attribute level) rather than a substance in its nonabsolute nature (the mode level)—for the most part leaving aside discussion of intra-attribute universality, something I explore elsewhere.

My paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I define key terms ("universal" and "nonuniversal," "realism" and "antirealism") and then lay out what background assumptions about Spinoza's metaphysics underpin my argument (the major one being that Spinozistic attributes are ontologically authentic). In section 3, I argue that the attributes of a Spinozistic substance are universals. A Spinozistic attribute, to summarize the argument, cannot be a nonuniversal because nonuniversal attributes do not conform to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles—a principle to which Spinoza without question believes attributes do conform. Although my central point in section 3 is to show, in effect, that a realist conception of universals is a key presumption behind Spinoza's case for substance monism, I lay out reasons to think as well that Spinoza is likely cognizant of this

[According to Spinoza's] non-realist construal of "agreement," to say that certain particulars "agree in nature" is just to say that they resemble one another [(rather than that they are identical in some respect) . . .]. [I]t is this non-realist construal of "agreement" as a cognized similarity that puts us on the right track in interpreting Spinoza's metaphysics. (Karolina Hübner, "Spinoza on Essences, Universals and Beings of Reason," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (2016): section 3.2)

3 See E1p17s/G II 63 lines 18-24 as well as E2p37-E2p39d, E1p5d, E1p8s2/G II 51 lines 13-14, and E2p10s; TTP 4.6; TP 11.2; Ep. 34.

4 For a thorough list of commentators who have held that Spinoza is a realist, see Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, ch. 1.2 and esp. Appendix D. Here is a clear expression of the interpretation that, in Fullerton's more dramatic words, Spinoza was "at heart as thorough a realist as any philosopher of the Middle Ages [...]. [H]e thought like a realist, he felt like a realist, he wrote like a realist" (George Fullerton, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: H. Holt, 1894), 220; George Fullerton, *On Spinozistic Immortality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1899), 33):

[If Spinoza were a nominalist, then each mode] might bear similarities to, but it could have nothing in common with, other modes. There could be no one nature in many things [...]. Nominalism, in short, would be the reductio ad absurdum of his philosophy. (Francis Haserot, "Spinoza and the Status of Universals," *Philosophical Review* 59, no. 4 (1950): 469-492)

5 For a thorough list of commentators who have held that Spinoza is inconsistent on the status of universals, see Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, ch. 1.2 and esp. Appendix D. Here is a clear expression of the interpretation that, in Martineau's more dramatic words, "Spinoza unconsciously retains the realism which he professes to renounce" (James Martineau, *A Study of Spinoza* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 150n2):

[For an antirealist like Spinoza] modes cannot share a common property [...]. [And yet t]here exist certain properties which are identical in all finite modes. Such an admission appears to put Spinoza's purported stance against the objective reality of universals in serious jeopardy (Edward Schoen, "The Role of Common Notions in Spinoza's Ethics," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 15, no. 4 (1977): 539-546)

presumption. In section 4, I respond to what seems a crucial concern: how an attribute can be a universal given the impossibility in Spinoza's ontology of an attribute having more than one instantiation. A Spinozistic attribute, despite being necessarily unique, is still a universal, so I explain, since it is the sort of thing that would be one and the same in each substance said to have an exactly similar attribute. Although my central point in section 4 is to show, in effect, that the objection rests on a metaphysically and historically mistaken view about universals, I lay out reasons to think as well that Spinoza is likely cognizant of the fact that the impossibility of an attribute's multiple instantiation does not render an attribute a nonuniversal. In section 5, I respond to what seems another crucial concern: how an attribute can be a universal given Spinoza's pejorative remarks against universals. Spinoza's pejorative remarks, so I explain, target those *bogus* universals apprehendable merely through the imagination, not those *real* universals—like the attributes of Extension and Thought—apprehendable through the intellect. Although my central point in section 5 is to show, in effect, that there is no inconsistency between Spinoza's rejection of universals and the fact that Spinozistic attributes are universals, I lay out reasons to think as well that Spinoza likely makes a conscious effort to preempt the charge of inconsistency.

2. Definitions and Assumptions

Point 1.—A universal is an entity—most typically a *qualitas* entity (property, nature, attribute, essence)—that is in principle disposed to remain undivided even when predicated of multiple things. In the (boilerplate) words of Keckermann, a central influence on Spinoza with respect to this subject, a universal is that which is apt to be one in many (“[*unum*] *aptum est multis inesse*”).⁶ To say that a universal is *apt* to be one in many is to say, at minimum (and as Spinoza puts it), that it does not itself impose a restriction on the number of items instantiating it (see E1p8s2/G II 50-51 in light of E2p49s; Ep. 50). As an entity apt, in other words (and in the language of Bayle), to be “indivisibly the same in every one of [the items instantiating it],” a universal is unique in that only it can ensure the unity, as Leibniz (in line with Suárez) puts it, of “identity in variety.” This is a unity tighter than the tightest of extrinsic attachments among things even in the most perfect operational harmony. This is a unity, so it is crucial to understand in this paper, tighter than even the unity of inherent exact similarity.⁷ Reflecting these core facts is Spinoza's own gloss on the concept, which adheres

6 Bartholomäus Keckermann, *Systema logicae* (Hanouiae: Apud Guilielmum Antonium, 1602), 46–48, 68; see Francesco Cerrato, *Cause e nozioni comuni nella filosofia di Spinoza* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2008), 119–120; Piero Di Vona, *Studi sull'ontologia di Spinoza. Parte I* (Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1960), vi, 46–47, 56, 81–83, 119, 140, 145, 156ff; Jakob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's in Quellenschriften, Urkunden und nichtamtlichen Nachrichten* (Leipzig: Verlag Von Veit, 1899), entry 106; Jeroen Van De Ven, “Life,” *The Bloomsbury Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Wiep Van Bunge (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13.

7 Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), entry on “Abelard”; Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und Christian Wolf*, ed. Carl I. Gerhardt (Halle: H. W. Schmidt, 1860), 172 and 161; Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1988), 5.2.8, 6.1.12-15, 6.2.1-2, 6.2.13, 6.5.3, 6.6.5, 6.6.12, 6.7.2; see C. Delisle Burns, “William of Ockham on Universals,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 14 (1914): 82; James Ross, “Suárez on Universals,” *Journal of Philosophy* 59, no. 23 (1962): 743.

to Aristotle's canonic description in *De interpretatione*:⁸ a universal is that which is said *wholly* and *equally* of each individual of which it is said (E2p49s/G II 134 lines 8-10), such that it "must be in each" individual of which it is said and "the same in all" of them (just as the essence of man is "[NS: wholly and equally [in] each individual man]") (E2p49s/G II 135 line 5ff, E3pref/G II 138 lines 12-18; see TIE 76; TP 3.18). In summary, a universal is the sort of entity that, even when in many items, resides wholly in each of those items.

Point 2.—A nonuniversal (a particular) is that which lacks, even in principle, the aptitude to be one and the same, undivided, in many. Following Ockham, who points out that "*numerical difference* is the essence of the particular" (since otherwise the supposed particular *in itself* would be a universal),⁹ nonuniversals are, in effect, those entities whose indiscernibility "is not sufficient for identity" and thus whose distinction from each other is "irreducibly primitive."¹⁰ Whereas perfect resemblance suffices for identity in the case of universals, nonuniversals—entities whose brute nonidentity to one another ensures noncompliance to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles—fail to satisfy that identity condition.¹¹

Point 3.—Realism is the view that there are (or at least could be) universals. Realists, in effect (and as Suárez describes them), are those who hold that objective agreement between distinct items can at least in some circumstances be explained in terms of *strict identity* between those items: one and the same form, nature, way, attribute, property, or so on wholly present in each.¹² On this view, substance *o* and presumably-distinct substance *r* both objectively being *F* (extended, say) is to be analyzed, at least in some circumstances, as *o* and *r* having one and the same attribute *F*ness.

Point 4.—Antirealism is the denial of realism. Antirealists, in effect (and as Suárez describes them), are those who hold that "agreement" or "sameness" or "resemblance" or "similarity" between distinct items—even if objective as well as absolutely perfect—can never be a matter of strict identity

8 Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, trans. John L. Ackrill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17a39-40.

9 Burns, "William of Ockham," 88, 99; see Richard Cross, "Medieval Theories of Haecceity," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2010); Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Aronold S. Kaufman and William K. Frankena (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 228; Michael A. Istvan Jr., "On the Possibility of Exactly Similar Tropes," *Abstracta* 6, no. 2 (2011): 158–177.

10 Keith Campbell, *Abstract Particulars* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 44; Yakir Levin, "Cartesian Minds," in *25th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, eds. Christian Kanzian, Joseph Quitterer, and Edmund Runggaldier (Kirchberg am Wechsel: ALWS, 2002): 133.

11 See David Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 114; Campbell, *Abstract Particulars*, 44; Douglas Ehring, "Distinguishing Universals from Particulars," *Analysis* 64, no. 4 (2004): 229–230; Anna-Sofia Maurin, *If Tropes* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 17; Thomas Pickavance, *Universals, Particulars, and the Identity of Indiscernibles* (Diss. University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 148; George Stout, "Universals Again," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 15 (1936): 9; Udo Thiel, "Individuation," in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 213–215, 233; Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21; Donald Williams, "Universals and Existents," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 64, no. 1 (1986): 3.

12 Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, 6.1.12, 6.2.11, 6.4.6; see Riccardo Chiaradonna and Gabriele Galluzzo, "Introduction," in *Universals in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Riccardo Chiaradonna and Gabriele Galluzzo (Pisa: Edizioni della Scuola Normale, 2013), 3; Scott MacDonald and Norman Malcolm, "Medieval Philosophy," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6., ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), 273–274; Fullerton, *On Spinozistic Immortality*, 27, 32.

between those items.¹³ On this view, substance *o* and presumably-distinct substance *r* both objectively being *F* (spherical, say) is never to be analyzed as *o* and *r* having one and the same attribute *F*ness.

Point 5.—I hold that Spinozistic attributes are ontologically authentic: that is, they are non-illusory, truly “out there” (as opposed to mere projections of the classifying mind).¹⁴ I also hold that Spinozistic substances are nothing but their attributes (as opposed to substrata in which attributes inhere). I lack the space to defend these claims in detail. Simply consider the following points:

(1) Spinozistic attributes exist “outside the intellect” (E1p4d) and so “in reality”¹⁵. That they exist in reality is what we would expect since (a) *infinite* intellect finds that God has—indeed, *consists of*¹⁶—many attributes (E2p4d in light of E1def6) and (b) the perception of infinite intellect—like the perception of *any* intellect, in fact (1p30d in light of E1def6)—cannot be mistaken as to what is true of reality in itself and cannot fail to be isomorphic with reality in itself.¹⁷ Indeed, Spinoza holds that each attribute, or “first element” of reality (TIE 75), is self-sufficient (Ep. 36): each is an “eternal”

13 Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, 5.2.8, 6.1.12-15, 6.2.13, 6.5.3; see Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Le sens commun: la philosophie de l'être et les formules dogmatiques* (Paris: Desclée, de Brouwer & cie, éditeurs, 1936), 39-40n1; Samuel Newlands, “Spinoza on Universals,” in *The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Stefano Di Bella and Tad M. Schmaltz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 62–86; Hübner, “Spinoza on Essences,” section 3.2; Ross, “Suárez on Universals, 736–748; Haserot, “The Status of Universals,” 470, 484. According to antirealist interpretations of Spinoza, then, to say in Spinoza’s world that items have an attribute in common, or belong to the same kind, or share an essence, or agree in nature, or have the same property, or so on is to say that those items at best merely exactly resemble (Hübner, “Spinoza on Essences,” esp. note 57). As Rice puts it, in Spinoza’s antirealist world “‘x has something in common with y’ = def ‘x is similar to y’”—not that there is one and the same feature instantiated by each (Lee Rice, “Tanquam Naturae Humanae Exemplar: Spinoza on Human Nature,” *Modern Schoolman* 68, no. 4 (1991): 301; 299, 301; see also Lee Rice, “Spinoza on Individuation,” in *Spinoza: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. Eugene Freeman and Maurice Mandelbaum (La Salle: Open Court, 1975), 210). Newlands agrees that Spinoza’s talk of agreement, sharing, commonality and the like should be understood in the antirealist-friendly way of mere similarity or resemblance. He makes the point well:

[O]bjective similarities [rather than identities] among particulars are that which, in things, ground the content of universal concepts [for Spinoza, who as a nominalist] uses “agreement” in a thinner sense that does not require literal sharing or multiple instantiation. (Newlands, “Spinoza on Universals,” 65–67)

14 Spinozistic attributes, in the parlance of Spinoza scholars, are “objective.” They are objective, yes, despite being dependent on intellect in the innocuous sense that everything in Spinoza’s ontology is dependent on intellect. Everything is dependent on intellect simply in that there is necessarily an intellect comprised of ideas for everything in Spinoza’s ontology (such that, even though the intellect in question is not causally responsible for all of these things to which it refers, deleting that intellect would entail deleting all of the things to which it refers) (see E2p3 in light of E1p30). By the way, attributes in Spinoza’s metaphysics are not the fundamental properties that, as Spinoza puts it, *imagination* might perceive as constituting the essence of God: jealousy, love, and so on. Rather, they are the fundamental properties that, as Spinoza puts it, *intellect* perceives as constituting the essence of God: Extension, Thought, and so on. See E1def6 in light of E1app/G II 82, E4p37s2; CM 1.6/G I 248 line 28-I 249 line 2; KV 1.7/G I 44 line 29, KV 1.2.28-29; TTP 4.11, TTP 13.8; Ep. 19/G IV 93, Ep. 21/G IV 127 lines 24-35, Ep. 56.

15 See Ep. 4; see Ep. 9 IV/43/21-30; CM 1.1/G I 235 lines 10-13, CM 1.2/G I 238 line 20ff, CM 1.6/G I 245 line 25.

16 See E1p10s; see E1p4d, E1p14c2 in light of E1p4d-E1p6c-E1p15d-E1p28d, E1p19, E1p20c2, E1p28d, E1p29s, E1p30d; Ep. 9 IV/45; Ep. 70.

17 See E2p43s, E2p44d in light of E4app4; CM 2.8; Ep. 12, Ep. 64; KV app1p4; KV 1.9.3; KV 2.22.4a.

“creature” (TIE 100; Ep. 6 IV/36) that is *in itself* (E1p29s; Ep. 2 IV/7/25-29), *conceived through itself*¹⁸, and thus (by E1a4) *self-caused*.¹⁹

(2) Spinozistic substances—*considered truly or in themselves or in their absolute natures* and so independent of any modes (see E1p5d)—are nothing but their attributes²⁰: “*Deus sive omnia Dei attributa*” (E1p19/G II 64 line 9, E1p20c2/G II 65 lines 6-7). If a substance in itself were not merely, in effect, the totality of its attributes, then a substance in itself would have something in excess to the totality of its attributes—some substratum in which the attributes inhere. It is clear, however, that a substance in itself does not have something in excess to the totality of its attributes. That is why Spinoza, for whom the *entirety* of reality is intelligible, says that the only knowledge possible (which is in fact knowledge of *everything*) is knowledge of either the attributes or the modes of God (E1p30d; see Ep. 56), and thus that the only knowledge of God—God *considered truly or in himself or in his absolute nature*, that is—is of God’s attributes (see E1p30d in light of E1p5d).²¹

Point 6.—Since Spinozistic attributes are ontologically authentic, Spinoza must endorse a constituent antirealist analysis—in short, a trope analysis—of a substance having attributes if he is an antirealist concerning universals. Unlike a *nonconstituent* antirealist analysis, which denies that substances have attributes that are universals by denying that substances have attributes altogether, a *constituent* antirealist analysis denies that substances have attributes that are universals by denying that the attributes that they really do have are universals.²² On this view, which on occasion has been attributed

18 See E1p29s; E1p10s; Ep. 2, IV/7/25-29, Ep. 8 IV/41; KV 1.7/G I 47 lines 1-3, KV 1.8/G I 47 lines 20-25.

19 See Ep. 10/G IV 47 lines 15-16; E1p20d in light of E1def8 and E1def1, E1p10s, E1p29s; KV 1.2/G I 32 line 27ff; KV 1.7/ G I 47 lines 1-3, KV app2/G I 119 lines 15-20; TIE 92. For a detailed defense of the view that Spinozistic attributes are ontologically authentic, see Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, chs. 3–5.

20 See E1def6, E1p4d, E1p10s, and E1p14c2 in light of E1p4d-E1p6c-E1p15d-E1p28d, E1p19, E1p20c2, E1p28d, E1p29s, E1p30d; Ep. 9 IV/45; DPP 1p7s; KV 2pref4/G I 53 lines 10-13.

21 For a detailed defense of the view that Spinozistic substances, considered in their absolute natures and so independent of their modes, are nothing but their attributes (however many they are said to have: one or many), see Michael A. Istvan Jr., “Spinoza’s Bundle Analysis of Substances Having Attributes,” *InCircolo: Rivista di filosofia e culture* 9 (2020): 137–185 in addition to section 3 below. For whatever it might be worth here, I hold (in line more or less with Deleuze, Curley, and Donagan) that Spinoza’s God, which Spinoza proves early in the *Ethics* to be the only substance (despite initiating his chain of reasoning noncommittal as to how many there are), is nothing but the totality of its *formally distinct* attributes: attributes incapable of existing without one another and yet, given their individual self-sufficiency, not causing one another. Seeing the attributes as merely formally distinct is a first step toward seeing how my bundle interpretation harmonizes with the unity and simplicity of God (see Istvan, “Spinoza’s Bundle Analysis,” esp. section 4; Michael A. Istvan Jr., “In Homage to Descartes and Spinoza: A Cosmo-Ontological Case for God,” *The Philosophical Forum* 52, no. 1 (2021): section 2.2).

22 So if Spinoza is an antirealist, then he is not going to be endorsing any form of nonconstituent antirealism, and so including its four most popular forms. (1) *Predicate antirealism* or *terminism*: a view, sometimes attributed to Hobbes, according to which substance *o* being *F* is not to be analyzed as *o* having some attribute *Fness* but rather merely as *o* arbitrarily falling under the predicate “*F*” (such that *o* would not be *F* were predicate “*F*” deleted). (2) *Concept antirealism* or *conceptualism*: a view, sometimes attributed to Abelard, according to which substance *o* being *F* is not to be analyzed as *o* having some attribute *Fness* but rather merely as *o* being subsumed arbitrarily under concept *F* (such that *o* would not be *F* were the concept *F* deleted). (3) *Resemblance antirealism*: a view, sometimes attributed to Gassendi, according to which substance *o* being *F* is not to be analyzed as *o* having some

to several early modern figures,²³ substance *o* and presumably-distinct substance *r* both objectively being *F* is to be analyzed as *o* and *r* each having its own nonuniversal (and so exactly similar but nonidentical) attribute *F*ness—each having, in the parlance of contemporary metaphysics, an *F*ness trope.

3. Spinozistic Attributes are Universals

Spinoza is an antirealist concerning universals only if the attributes of a Spinozistic substance are tropes (see section 2, point 6). The question, then, is whether they are tropes. The answer is that they are not. Consider the following argument (which assumes, of course, that we are talking about *Spinozistic* substances):

1. If attribute *F*ness is a trope, then if there are two distinct *F* substances, the *F*ness in the one is nonidentical to the exactly similar *F*ness in the other.

Rationale.—Since tropes are nonuniversals, and since nonuniversals do not conform to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles (see point 2, section 2),²⁴ the *F*ness trope in one substance is nonidentical to the exactly similar *F*ness trope in the other substance.

attribute *F*ness but rather merely as *o* suitably resembling paradigm *F* substances (such that *o* would not be *F* were those other *F* substances deleted). (4) *Austere antirealism*: a view, sometimes attributed to Leibniz, according to which substance *o*'s being *F* is not to be analyzed as *o*'s having some attribute *F*ness but rather simply as *o*'s being *F* (such that *o*'s being *F* is, in effect, unanalyzably brute). It makes sense that the *relational* forms, options 1 through 3, are out for Spinoza. God cannot be parasitic upon something else—a predicate, a concept, a paradigm—to be what God is. It makes sense that the nonrelational form, option 4, is out too. Things have true definitions for Spinoza (see E1def6 in light of Ep. 2). A true definition refers to a thing as it is in itself (Ep. 9 and Ep. 4). Since for Spinoza a true definition refers only to the properties of a thing (in particular, its essential properties, see 1p8s2), things really do have properties in themselves.—For a list of historical representatives of these various antirealist positions and more (especially in the early modern period), see Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, esp. Appendix A.

- 23 The trope analysis has been attributed, for example, to Reid, Locke, Boyle, and also Spinoza. For a thorough list of commentators, see Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, ch. 2.2.2. and Appendix A 3.4. Several commentators, so it seems a good time to mention, suggest that the debate over whether the attributes have objective reality in Spinoza's system, on the one hand, and the debate as to whether attributes are universals in Spinoza's system, on the other, perfectly overlap when set in the context of the early modern period (see Haserot, "The Status of Universals," 470–484; Martineau, *A Study of Spinoza*, 150n2; Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), 142–156). The environment of the early modern period was one where, as Bolton suggests, the default assumption was that properties are universals (Martha Bolton, "Universals, Essences, and Abstract Entities," in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 183–186). It was an environment, in effect, where the default way to reject universals was to adopt one of the many non-trope forms of antirealism mentioned in the previous footnote—rejecting, that is, the ontological authenticity of *qualitas* entities altogether, and so the possibility of the trope option (even if one still used property-quality-essence-attribute language for the sake of convenience).
- 24 Remember, exactly similar tropes are entities whose distinction from each other is brute. Since the PSR is to be honored in Spinoza's system (see E1a2, E1p7d, E1p8s2, E1p11d2; E1p16; E1p18), such talk of brute distinction between perfectly resembling tropes is to be understood—if only to give the trope interpretation a fighting chance—in Spinoza's *welcomed* sense of bruteness (see Michael A. Istvan Jr., "A Rationalist Defence of Determinism," *Theoria*

2. It is not the case that if there are two distinct *F* substances, then the *F*ness in the one is nonidentical to the exactly similar *F*ness in the other.

Rationale.—Since the *F*ness in the one substance would be indiscernible from the *F*ness in the other substance (see E1p5d), and since indiscernibility implies identity for Spinoza (E1p4 plus E1p5d), the *F*ness in the one would have to be strictly identical to the *F*ness in the other.

Therefore, it is not the case that attribute *F*ness is a trope.

Here is the basic argument in relaxed terms. Spinoza says that if we assume that there are two substances indiscernible in terms of attribute *F*ness, then the *F*ness in the one would be strictly identical to the *F*ness in the other. The *F*ness in the one would be strictly identical to the *F*ness in the other because, so at least Spinoza thinks it enough to point out, the *F*ness in the one would be indiscernible from the *F*ness in the other (E1p5d/G II 48 lines 13-15). The trope analysis, however, denies that the indiscernibility of the two substances in terms of *F*ness entails the identity of the two substances in terms of *F*ness. Therefore, it is not the case that *F*ness is a trope, a nonuniversal nature.²⁵

Spinoza would be unentitled to his all-important E1p5 view—namely, that distinct substances indistinguishable in terms of attribute are truly identical—if he endorsed the trope analysis. Consider a rendition of E1p5d:

Assume there are numerically different substances, *s*1 and *s*2, of the same nature or attribute (G II 48 line 10). Things are numerically different only if they are different in terms of modes or in terms of attributes (E1p4). (Mode difference and attribute difference are the only candidate grounds for numerical distinction because whatever is is either in itself or in another (1a1), that is, whatever is is either a substance (E1def3) or a mode (E1def5), and a substance is the totality of its attributes (E1p4d, and see point 5, section 2). Since *s*1 and *s*2 are both of the same nature or attribute, the explanation for their numerical difference can only be that they have different modes. The problem is that even the most drastic difference in modes cannot ground the numerical difference between substances. For substances are prior in nature to modes (E1p1, and see TTP 4.8; E1p5d, E1p10; KV 1.2/G I 25 line 35), as is clear by the asymmetrical dependence relation between substances and modes: modes depend on substances whereas substances do not depend on modes (see E1def3 and E1def5). Since substances are numerically different only if they have different attributes (E1p4 in light of E1p1), the opening

87, no. 2 (2021): section 5.1). That is to say, it is to be understood as meaning that their distinction from each other is due to nothing but *themselves alone*: there is an answer to why they are distinct and *they themselves* provide that answer. Their distinction from one another is to be understood, in effect, as primitive in the PSR-friendly sense of *self-grounded* rather than in the PSR-unfriendly sense of true-but-*ungrounded*.

25 “[A] conflict between Spinoza’s view and trope theory,” so Melamed nicely makes the point, “is the issue of the possibility of perfectly similar tropes, which Spinoza, following his endorsement of the Identity of Indiscernibles (E1p4), would be pressed to reject” (Yitzhak Melamed, “Spinoza’s Metaphysics of Substance: The Substance-Mode Relation as a Relation of Inherence and Predication,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78, no. 1 (2009): 74n182; see also Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 56n186).

assumption—that *s1* and *s2* are of the same nature or attribute—is absurd. Therefore, there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.

How would regarding attributes as tropes undermine Spinoza's E1p5d? By granting (a) that there are two substances (*s1* and *s2*) indistinguishable in terms of attribute (which Spinoza does at E1p5d/G II 48 line 10), and by granting (b) that Spinoza regards attributes as tropes (which we are, in effect, for *reductio*), we are granting that substances *s1* and *s2* have attributes indistinguishable and yet nonidentical. The problem is clear. For Spinoza, there is numerical difference between substances only if there is qualitative difference between them. That is, Spinoza endorses the dissimilarity of the diverse or, if you will, the discernibility of the nonidentical: the contrapositive rendering, of course, of the identity of indiscernibles (E1p4 in light of E1p5d). If he thought that indiscernible attributes were nonidentical, then he would be barred from saying that *s1* and *s2* are the same substances. Spinoza does not regard attributes as tropes.

What Spinoza does is take attributes to be universals, and thus strictly identical in all purported instances. That is what allows his posited *many* substances of the same nature at E1p5d to be “turned” (*versus*) into “one” (*unus*), in accord with the meaning of the Latin term for “universal” (“*uni-versus*”) and in accord with Socrates's claim that the universal is friend to the singular and foe to the plural (see *Meno* 77a). “Nominalists, and this includes most empiricists, must say no” to the question whether the sameness between “different [substances] having the *same* property, being of the *same* kind, and so on” can be “strict identity.”²⁶ Spinoza, on the contrary, clearly says “yes.”

That Spinoza says “yes” is crucial to his case for monism. The following argument sets us up to see exactly why.

1. If Spinoza rules out the reality of multiple substances exactly similar in attributes *merely based on their being exactly similar in attributes*, then he must hold the following positions: (a) each substance is nothing but its attributes; (b) a substance's attributes are universals.
2. Spinoza does rule out the reality of multiple substances exactly similar in attributes *merely based on their being exactly similar in attributes* (see E1p4-E1p5d, E1p14d).

Therefore, Spinoza must be holding the following positions: (a) each substance is nothing but its attributes; (b) a substance's attributes are universals.

Premise 2 is obvious. What, though, is the rationale for premise 1? Why think, that is, that the two positions stated in the consequent of premise 1 (position-a and position-b) are each necessary for the antecedent?

First, here is why position-a—namely, that each substance is nothing but its attributes—is necessary for the antecedent of premise 1. If substances are not just their attributes (the only *qualitas* entities there are at the level of substances *considered truly*), then what that means in Spinoza's historical context (as in ours) is that each substance at its core is a substratum: a bare particular in which its attributes inhere.²⁷ Since substrata are nonuniversals (and so fail to conform to the principle

26 David Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15.

27 See Melamed, “Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance,” 74; Roger Woolhouse, *Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz: The Concept of Substance in Seventeenth-Century Metaphysics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 49.

of the identity of indiscernibles: see point 2, section 2), the substratum that each substance is at its core is necessarily numerically distinct from any other substratum.²⁸ So each substance must be exhausted by its attributes (as we already know to be nonconditionally true for Spinoza: see point 5, section 2) if Spinoza rules out the reality of multiple substances exactly similar in attributes merely based on their being exactly similar in attributes.

Second, here is why position-b—namely, that attributes are universals—is necessary for the antecedent of premise 1. If attributes were nonuniversals, then it should be clear by now what that means: each substance would have its own attribute numerically distinct from any other attribute of any other substance—numerically distinct even if exactly similar. Remember: an attribute is a universal if and only if exact similarity suffices for identity (otherwise it is a trope—a nonuniversal attribute).²⁹ So each attribute is a universal if Spinoza rules out the reality of multiple substances exactly similar in attributes merely based on their being exactly similar in attributes.

Nolan, in line with Jarrett before him,³⁰ suggests that Spinozistic attributes must be universals for this reason. He suggests as much in a telling side-comment in the midst of pointing out that, if a Cartesian substance too is nothing but its attributes, Descartes is entitled to a plurality of substances only if attributes are nonuniversal properties.

Descartes's theory of universals is a corollary to his theory of attributes [...]. Attributes [...] are not universals [...]. An attribute [for Descartes] cannot be [a universal] because, if it were, then all substances which shared it would be identical. If substance A is identical with the attribute [*F*ness] and substance B is identical with [*F*ness too] then, by the transitivity of identity, A and B are also identical. *Spinoza would approve of this result* but Descartes would not.³¹

Whitehead also holds that Spinoza's construal of attributes as universals enables him to move from substance pluralism to substance monism early in the *Ethics*. Spinoza's view that entities can be "described by universals" is, according to Whitehead, what allows him to collapse many substances into one.

An actual entity cannot be described, even inadequately, by universals [...]. The contrary opinion led to the collapse of Descartes's many substances into Spinoza's one substance.³²

28 See Burns, "William of Ockham," 88, 99; Cross, "Medieval Theories."

29 See Douglas Ehring, *Tropes: Properties, Objects, and Mental Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 44.

According to Ehring, "Exact similarity is sufficient for identity for universals. Inherently exactly similar universals are identical no matter how they are related spatially or causally (or temporally) [...]. [But] particulars do not satisfy this same identity condition [...]. [F]or universals, but not tropes, inherent exact similarity is sufficient for identity." (Ehring, "Distinguishing Universals," 229–231)

30 See Charles Jarrett, "Cartesian Pluralism and the Real Distinction," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (1981): 356.

31 Lawrence Nolan, "Descartes' Theory of Universals," *Philosophical Studies* 89, no. 2/3 (1998): 170–171 (my emphasis).

32 Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David R. Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 48.

As is clear in his dictionary entry on Abelard (as well as in his earlier Sedan *Theses* of 1680), Bayle insists that realism concerning universals is what allows Spinoza to arrive at the view that there can be only one substance. In that entry, Bayle describes how Abelard convinced his teacher, William of Champeaux, to renounce realism. Clearing Champeaux's mind of realism amounted to clearing Champeaux's mind, so Bayle writes, of "disguis'd Spinozism." In a footnote following this remark, Bayle expounds upon the link between realism and Spinozism:

[As Abelard notes, the believer in universals is one who says that] "the same thing exists essentially and wholly in every one of its individuals, among which there is no difference as to essence, but only a variety arising from a number of accidents." The Scotists [...] are not wide of this notion. Now I say, that Spinozism is only carrying this doctrine further: for, according to the followers of Scotus, universal natures are indivisibly the same in every one of their individuals: the human nature of Peter is indivisibly the same with the human nature of Paul. Upon what foundation do they say this? Why, because the same attribute of man, which is applicable to Peter, agrees with Paul. This is the very fallacy of Spinozism. The attribute, say they, does not differ from the substance, of which it is predicated: therefore, wherever the same attribute is found, there is the same substance; and consequently, since the same attribute is found in all substances, there can possibly be but one substance.³³

Bringing out what is most relevant to me, here is what Bayle is saying. Spinoza, like all realists concerning universals, holds that the same attribute exists wholly in every one of the substances with that attribute. Spinoza also holds, however, (1) that substances are just their attributes (E1p4d; see point 5, section 2) and (2) that modes—the "accidents"—*cannot* individuate substances (E1p5d). In light of his realism plus his endorsement of these two additional points, Spinoza finds there to be nothing left to individuate substances. Spinoza concludes, therefore, that there is only one substance.

Bayle's view that realism opens the door to substance monism is widespread throughout the history of philosophy. We see it from Abelard to David of Dinant to Leibniz to Mendelssohn to Maret to Bradley to De Wulf to Stout. "[T]he doctrine that qualities and relations are universals," Stout says, "leads naturally, if not inevitably, to the denial of an ultimate plurality of substances."³⁴ Monism appears to be, De Wulf explains, "the logical and necessary consequence of extreme realism."³⁵ As Maret puts it, from realism to the denial of substance pluralism and the affirmation, in particular, of "Pantheism there is but one step."³⁶ That "one step" is presumably what Bayle, in the above quote, breaks up into two: (1) affirm that substances are nothing but their attributes (attributes regarded as universals) and (2) affirm that modes cannot individuate substances.

Nowadays it is often considered embarrassing to endorse, as I have argued Spinoza does, the view that substances are nothing but their universal attributes. The reason is that such a view, "bundle realism" in contemporary lingo, entails a principle—one of Spinoza's most cherished, in fact—that

33 Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, entry on "Abelard."

34 See John Mackenzie, "Universals and Orders," *Mind* 31, no. 122 (1922): 191.

35 Maurice De Wulf, *History of Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1952), 154.

36 See John Hunt, *An Essay on Pantheism* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1866), 147–148.

many regard as too ridiculous even to be considered: that indiscernibility between substances entails their identity. Beebe, Effingham, and Goff put the problem nicely:

There is a significant difficulty facing the bundle theorist who takes properties to be universals. This is because the conjunction of bundle theory and realism about universals entails that two distinct objects cannot have all the same properties. If object *x* is just a bundle of its properties, [and if] object *y* is just a bundle of its properties, and the properties of *x* are numerically identical to the properties of *y* (being [that they are] universals), it follows that *x* is numerically identical to *y*. However, it seems eminently possible for there to be two distinct objects with all the same properties.³⁷

Here is Armstrong's rendition:

If the bundle-of-universals view is correct, then it follows that two different things cannot have exactly the same properties [...]. For given this theory, they would be exactly the same thing. However, against the Bundle theory, it seems possible that two things should have exactly the same properties, that is, be exactly alike [(and still be two) ...]. What I have just said is recognized to be an important argument against the bundle-of-universals analysis.³⁸

Spinoza, however, is fine—flagrantly fine—with the indiscernibility-implies-identity implication of his bundle realism (see E1p4-E1p5d; KV app1p4c/G I 116 line 25ff). As the saying goes: one philosopher's modus tollens is another philosopher's modus ponens. And so philosopher *x*, who represents the contemporary sensibility, reasons as follows:

1. If bundle realism is true, then there cannot be indiscernible substances even in principle.
2. There can be indiscernible substances in principle.

Therefore, bundle realism is false.

Spinoza, on the other hand, reasons as follows:

1. If bundle realism is true, then there cannot be indiscernible substances even in principle.
2. Bundle realism is true.

Therefore, there cannot be indiscernible substances even in principle.

Spinoza's identity of indiscernibles might be seen, in effect, as a consequence of his bundle realism. The bundle aspect is stated throughout the *Ethics* (see point 5, section 2). The realist aspect is a background assumption (see especially the discussions surrounding E1p8s2 both at the end of this

37 Helen Beebe, Neil Effingham, and Peter Goff, *Metaphysics: The Key Concepts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 23.

38 Armstrong, *Universals*, 64–66.

section and toward the end of section 4)—an assumption defensible, were the need ever to rise, on grounds of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR).³⁹

Here is a more relaxed way to think about the matter. As Ockham never let his realist opponents forget, a problem that nags realism is how to account for why this thing is *this* thing and not some other—possibly qualitatively indiscernible—thing.⁴⁰ Unlike antirealism, which renders the need to search for a principle of individuation superfluous (since it holds that whatever exists is nonuniversal in itself), realism faces a problem as to how to account for individuation (since it is the view that allows for strict identity in diversity). Realism faces this problem because, to use again Socrates’s colorful way of speaking, the universal is friend to the singular and enemy to the plural. How does Spinoza handle the individuation issue nagging realists like himself? He simply uses it to reject substance pluralism!

Spinozistic attributes are universals. That much seems clear. There are reasons to think, however, that Spinoza also understands at some level that each attribute is a universal. Consider the following case. A nature, Spinoza states, does not itself impose a restriction on the number of substances of which it is equally predicated (E1p8s2/G II 50-II 51; Ep. 50; TIE 95).⁴¹ That a nature does not itself impose a restriction on the number of substances of which it is equally predicated means, according to common understanding, that it is a universal (see point 1, section 2). Look at it this way. Why does Aristotle famously insist that “definition is of the universal”?⁴² There are two reasons, and Spinoza endorses both here at E1p8s2: (1) the definition of a thing refers to the nature of a thing and (2) the nature of a thing imposes no restriction on the number of things of which it is predicated. The more important point, however, is this: that a nature does not itself impose a restriction on the number of substances of which it is equally predicated means, according to Spinoza’s own understanding, that it is a universal. For a universal, Spinoza explains, is that which could be equally predicated of one, or many, or infinitely many things (E2p49s/G II 134 lines 8-10). Why is it significant to point out here that a nature is a universal for Spinoza? Well, an attribute is a nature. Spinoza says so explicitly, using the identity term “*sive*” to link “attribute” and “nature” (E1p5).

39 The trope view of properties, the only other option if we accept the reality of properties and yet deny they are universals, stands in violation of the PSR. Consider the so-called “swapping problem” made famous by Armstrong (see *Universals*, 132) but presented in nascent form by Edwards in the early modern period (see *Freedom of the Will*, 228). Imagine two spheres with exactly similar but nonidentical roundness tropes. Now, imagine the tropes are swapped. Since the pre-swapped and swapped scenarios could not be told apart even by the most powerful mind, there is no sufficient reason for denying the identity of the purportedly two properties. To be sure, the swapping problem is not a mortal wound for trope theory according to many contemporary metaphysicians. Many contemporary metaphysicians, after all, reject the PSR. They do so in light of the apparent reality of uncaused quantum events (microworld events that pop up out of literal nonbeing)—a questionable interpretation of quantum mechanics, and one that conveniently serves an addiction (widespread in contemporary metaphysics) to pulling brute-fact cards (see Istvan, “A Rationalist Defence,” section 5.1). Such an empty possibility, however, would be a mortal wound according to Spinoza, committed as he stands to the most full-throated version of the PSR.

40 See Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject*, 213, 215, 233; Levin, “Cartesian Minds,” 134.

41 Technically, Spinoza says “individuals” here, rather than “substances.” But in E1p8s2 Spinoza used “individual” as the more general term, such that what applies to individuals in general applies to substances in particular. Indeed, in this scholium Spinoza is providing an alternative proof for E1p5: the view that there cannot be multiple *substances* with the same attribute.

42 See Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. John H. MacMahon (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1991), 1036a28-29 and 1040a8.

And he is clearly using the term “nature” as a stylistic variant of “attribute” in E1p8s2. For in E1p8s2 he is giving an alternative proof for E1p5: the view that “there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.”

4. Concern #1: How Can Unrepeatable Attributes Be Universals?

How can Spinozistic attributes be universals when there is necessarily only one substance, God, that instantiates each attribute? Does not the very uniqueness of Spinoza’s God—indeed, its necessary one-of-a-kindness—render that position a nonstarter? That is perhaps the most major concern someone might have with my claim that Spinozistic attributes are universals.⁴³ I have heard it raised again and again over the last decade from various Spinoza scholars (mainly the North American scholars).

Here is my short response:

1. Spinozistic attributes cannot be nonuniversals (as I have argued).
2. The domain of the universal and the domain of the nonuniversal are exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

Therefore, Spinozistic attributes are universals.

Such a response would likely be unsatisfying to those who raise the concern. Is not the whole point of a universal, one might say, to explain similar features in more than one substance? “If there is only one [*F* substance], it seems otiose,” as Adamson makes the point, “to posit a universal [*F*ness]. A universal is, after all, a one over many—not a one over one.”⁴⁴ Let me try to give a more satisfying response, then.

Adamson’s words here, it should be understood, are just a provocative set up for him to explain that, despite what nonspecialists in the problem of universals might believe, an attribute’s being instantiated only once does not rule out its being a universal. Just because a universal is that which in principle is disposed or apt to be one in many, that does not mean that a universal must *actually be* in many. The point—intuitive on its own (since how would the mere *number* of things with a

43 See Hübner “Spinoza on Essences,” section 2.2; Melamed, “Spinoza’s Metaphysics of Substance,” 75; Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 58.

44 Peter Adamson, “One of a Kind: Unique Instantiation in Plotinus and Porphyry,” in *Universals in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Riccardo Chiaradonna and Gabriele Galluzzo (Pisa: Edizioni della Scuola Normale, 2013), 329–330. For this reason, several commentators—including Macherey, Cushman, Goetschel, Hartshorne, Klercke, McMurtrie, Sutcliffe, Scruton, Wartofsky (see Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, ch. 5.6)—lean toward the conclusion that Spinoza’s system deconstructs the universal-nonuniversal dichotomy. According to this conclusion, an attribute is *both* a universal and a nonuniversal: a universal for reasons explained in this paper, and a nonuniversal since there can be only one instantiation. In this case—in line with the both-and-neither-nor logic of deconstruction—an attribute is *neither* a universal *nor* a nonuniversal. “Since for Spinoza there is only one ultimate subject of predication (i.e., God),” so Melamed gestures toward the point with less Derridean certainty, “one may wonder whether the distinction between particular and universal properties has any real place” (“Spinoza’s Metaphysics of Substance,” 75). The problem with the deconstruction-dialetheism interpretation is Spinoza’s categorical claim that what is true can never contradict what is true (see Ep. 21 IV/126/30, Ep. 56; E1p11d).

certain nature affect *what* that nature is?)—has been long recognized by those in the know.⁴⁵ Echoing Alexander of Aphrodisias’s own explanation as to why a universal remains a universal no matter the number of its instantiations (“a human being is a human being, whether there are several sharing in this nature or not”),⁴⁶ Fonseca makes the point precisely:

The universal is [...] *apt by its own nature as to be in many items* [...]. It is not merely said by the philosophers [...] that *it is actually in* several items, but that *it is apt to be in* many items, for it may actually be [merely] in one individual.⁴⁷

In fact, an attribute’s status as a universal is not ruled out even if it is *impossible* for it to have more than one instantiation.⁴⁸ Recall what I mentioned in section 2: to say that a universal is *apt* to be one in many is to say, at minimum (and in Spinoza’s language), that it does not itself impose a restriction on the number of items instantiating it (see E1p8s2/G II 50-II 51 in light of E2p49s). A sufficient indication of *Fness*’s aptness to be one in many is that if there were another *F* substance in addition to this *F* substance, then there would be one and the same *Fness* in each. A universal attribute even with *necessarily* one instance (phoenixness for Boethius and Porphyry) is still a universal, then, because it is the sort of thing with the disposition to be wholly repeated, a disposition apparent when put in certain counterfactual scenarios.⁴⁹ For example, even though for Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias it is metaphysically impossible for there to be another sun, sunness is still a universal because were there, *per impossibile*, another sun it would instantiate one and the same sunness nature undivided in each.⁵⁰

There is, in effect, a litmus test, recognized since before the time of Aristotle, for whether an attribute is a universal. First you posit, even if *per impossibile*, some *F* substance in addition to the one that already exists (another sun, say, in addition to the one that already exists). Next you ask yourself whether there is one and the same *Fness* in each. If there is one and the same *Fness* in each, then the *Fness* of the substance with which you started is a universal. When we look to Spinoza’s moves at E1p5d and E1p14d, it is clear that he holds that if there were, *per impossibile*, another *F* substance besides God, then the *Fness* in both God and the other substance would be one and the same (see also perhaps E2p49s/G II 135 line 5ff, E3pref/G II 138 lines 12-18, E4p4d G II 213 lines 15-19).⁵¹

45 We see this point in Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Boethius, Ordo of Tournai, Gersonides, Fonseca, and more (see Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, ch. 5.6).

46 Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Quaestiones 1.1-2.15*, trans. by Robert W. Sharples (London: Duckworth, 1992), 1.3.8.12-17.

47 Pedro Fonseca, *Isagoge philosophica* (Olyssipone: apud Antoniu Alvarez, 1591), ch. 1.

48 See Chris Swoyer and Francesco Orilia, “Properties,” in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2011); Gideon Rosen et al, *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Norton, 2015), 1114.

49 See Adamson, “One of a Kind,” 337; Chiaradonna and Galluzzo, “Introduction,” 18; Swoyer and Orilia, “Properties.”

50 See Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, 1036a28-29, 1038b, 1040b, 1040a8; Adamson, “One of a Kind,” 337–339, 345–350.

51 This line of reasoning here, along with the ways in which the trope view violates the PSR (see footnote 39), shuts down an objection I sometimes hear—an objection that rests on the mistaken idea that a property must actually be in many to be a universal. “Attributes would have to be universals, yes, if *per impossibile* there were more than one substance. But there is not more than one substance. Therefore, we can at least say *we do not know* whether attributes have to be universals for Spinoza.”

Does it still seem strange to say that attribute *F*ness has a certain aptitude for being one and the same in many when it is impossible that *F*ness ever could be in many? If so, look at it this way. An attribute is a nature (E1p5; E1p8s2). A nature, recall, does not itself impose a restriction on the number of substances that exemplify it (E1p8s2/G II 50-II 51; Ep. 50; TIE 95). That a nature does not itself impose a restriction on the number of substances that exemplify it entails, according to Spinoza, that only a cause *external* to a given nature can explain why there are multiple exemplifications of that nature (E1p8s2/G II 51). It is precisely because each self-sufficient attribute of a substance cannot be influenced by anything external to itself that there cannot be multiple exemplifications. A given attribute is not exemplified by more than one substance, in other words, because there is nothing beyond that substance to explain it being exemplified by more than one substance. It remains true, therefore, that an attribute in itself, like any nature in itself, does not impose a restriction on its number of exemplifications. It is important to remember that at E1p8s2 Spinoza uses this very fact to concoct an alternative proof for E1p5: the claim that there cannot be multiple exemplifications of an attribute. So clearly, in case there were any doubts, he holds that an attribute's inability to impose a restriction on the number of its exemplifications is compatible with it being impossible for it to have more than one exemplification.

Let me conclude this section by circling back to my core argument. The impossibility of an attribute's being instantiated in more than one substance does not mean that a given attribute has no aptitude to be one in many. Quite the contrary. The impossibility of an attribute's being instantiated in more than one substance is guaranteed *by its very aptitude to be one in many*—plus, of course, other bedrock facts. One such bedrock fact is that an attribute is prior in nature to its modes, in which case the distinction between two substances of the same attributes could not be grounded in their mode differences (see E1p5d). Another such fact is that substances are not in any way in excess to the totality of their attributes, in which case the distinction between two substances of the same attributes could not be grounded in their having different substrata (see E1p4d and point 5, section 2). As my core case for attributes being universals makes clear, to take away the presumption that attributes are apt to be one and the same in many—that is, to take away the presumption that attributes are universals—would be to undermine Spinoza's argument for the claim that there cannot be more than one substance with a certain attribute. That attributes are universals, rather than being ruled out by Spinoza's no-shared-attribute thesis (E1p5), is the key presumption behind that thesis!

5. Concern #2: How Can Attributes Be Universals When Spinoza Rejects Universals?

How can Spinozistic attributes be universals when Spinoza notoriously condemns universals? That is another concern someone might have with my claim that Spinozistic attributes are universals.⁵² The concern only intensifies when we consider that, as I suggested at the end of section 3, Spinoza seems to comprehend that the attributes are universals. Do we have a contradiction here?

One would have to be fairly uncharitable to think so. Just as Nietzsche's pejorative remarks against morality do not mean that Nietzsche rejects all morality, Spinoza's pejorative remarks against universals do not mean that Spinoza rejects all universals. Spinoza rejects the ontological authenticity

⁵² See Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, Appendix D.

only of those universals apprehendable merely through the imagination: imaginative universals or, if you will, universals of imaginative experience.

Consider the Appendix to Part 1 of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Here Spinoza rules out merely those universals that seem true according to the bodily apparatus of the perceiving subject: universals of imaginative experience (beauty, coldness, hardness, and the like). Spinoza ridicules the notion that the celestial spheres, for example, each instantiate the property *being harmonious in sound*. Even if the spheres do produce sounds, whether those sounds are harmonious in some way is relative to us. If those spheres produced sounds that gave us headaches, would we call them "harmonious"? The same goes with *smoothness*. Whether a given surface is smooth depends on the disposition of the perceiver. The surface that one hand finds smooth, after all, is bumpy to a sensitive hand. If we are to understand nature as it is in itself, which is what the "highest blessedness" involves for Spinoza, we must not let ourselves get distracted by such fictions (Ep. 21 IV/127/34-35; see TIE 39/G II 16 lines 11-20; E4p28d, E4app4/G II 267 lines 1-14, E5p42s; Ep. 75). That is what Spinoza urges, anyway.

Consider now E2p40s1, Spinoza's definitive statement against universals. Here Spinoza explains why we overlook the differences between perceived items. Not only is it that the differences are often slight (see TIE 76), but we are impacted by so many images at once (think of all the images of leaves when we look at a tree) that we lack the power to keep each separate from each other. To cope with the barrage of data, the finite mind—able to handle only a limited quantity of impressions—overlooks the peculiarities. Each leaf-image bleeding into one another, what stands out is what all these items seem to have in common. The commonality in question, though, is true of those items merely "insofar as they affect the body" (E2p40s1/G II 121 lines 19-20). Once again, Spinoza is rejecting the universals of imaginative experience.

In both E1app and E2p40s1 Spinoza rebukes those who let the imagination, the only source of falsity (E2p28s, E2p40s2, E2p41d, E5p28d), convince them that the commonalities grasped through sensation are true of reality itself. Arising "so immediately" from automatic comparison processes (CM 1.1/G I 234 line 32), which can make it go unnoticed that they are "merely our own work" (KV 1.10/G I 49 lines 5-6), these agreements are, in truth, a joint product of the objects *plus* our bodily dispositions—these objects *amalgamated with* our bodily dispositions (E2p16, E2p16c2, E2p25, E2p28, E3p27d, E3p32s, E3p56d, E4p1s). In fact, since our bodies are the sites of the amalgamation, these agreements—these truncated "affections of [our] imagination" (E1app), these "universal images of things according to [our physical] disposition" (E2p40s1)—indicate the natures of our bodies *more so* than the natures of the perceived objects (E1app, E2p16c, E2p16c1, E2p16c2, E3p14d, E4p9d, E5p34d) and so perhaps are best described as common "traces" left on our bodies (CM 1.1/G I 234).

So yes, Spinoza criticizes us for mistaking the common traces things leave on our bodies for positive universals instantiated in things themselves (E1app/G II 82 lines 16-22, E4pref/G II 208 lines 8-14, E4p73s; Ep. 6/G IV 28 lines 10-16; Ep. 54). But never does he set his sights on universals apprehended by the intellect (E2p40s2 in light of E5p40c), an unwavering source of adequate and thus true ideas (E2p40s2, E2p44; Ep. 2, Ep. 60). Spinoza does not set his sights, for instance, on the attribute of Extension, which he describes as a universal in his exposition of the Cartesian philosophy (DPP 1prol/G I 142 lines 33-34) and which he describes as being the true in-common-to-all-bodies referent of a "universal notion" in the *Ethics* (E2p37 plus E2p1312d in light of E2p40s2/G II 122

lines 1-2, E5p12d; see E5p36s). Given that Spinoza labels the ideational correlate of Extension a “universal notion,” and given Spinoza’s historically sensitive definition of a universal as that which is apt to be one and the same in many, it seems fairly clear that he himself regards Extension as a universal. After all, Spinoza repeats the formula “common *sive* universal” (E2p49s/G II 134 lines 4-5; TTP 4.6/G III 61 lines 16-17, TTP 6.10-11/G III 88 lines 15-16, TTP 7.6/G III 102) and associates being “inherent” in many with being universal (TP 3.18) and being “one and the same” in many with being universal (E3pref/G II 138 lines 12-18). This is significant since Spinoza states that the attribute of Extension is common to—as well as inherent and one and the same in—all bodies (E2p37 in light of E2p13l2d). It makes sense, then, that Spinoza has no problem calling the properties common to all bodies (the most fundamental one being Extension) universals (TTP 7.6/G III 102 lines 16-20) or insisting that “knowledge of [God, which gives rise to the love of God in which blessedness consists (see E5p42d plus TTP 4.6),] has to be drawn from universal notions that are certain in themselves” (TTP 4.6).

The telling mark as to whether a candidate universal pertains to nature as it is in itself is by what means it can be apprehended: if by the intellect or “pure thought,” then the candidate universal has objective reality; if merely through the imagination or bodily sensation, then it does not (TTP 4.5 in light of TTP 4.6; compare E2p40s2 with E2p40s1; see Ep. 13 IV/64/30; Ep. 11 IV/48/27-30).⁵³ Unlike the imagination, which sees only through how our bodies are impacted externally and thus often confusedly (E2p29s; see E2p49s/G II 132 lines 5-6, E3p32s), the intellect sees “by its inborn power” and thus always clearly and distinctly (TIE 31; see TIE 32, TIE 39, TIE 107-108; E3def 1e of the affects; Ep. 37). The intellect understands the world through mere ratiocination concerning “principles and axioms” (TTP 1.28; E2p29s) rather than through sense experience, which in presenting nothing more than ways in which our bodies are affected (E3p32s) cannot give us access to things in their truth (Ep. 10 IV/47/11-12). “Determined internally” rather than “from fortuitous encounters with [external] things” (E2p49s in light of E2p29s), active rather than reactive, the intellect “regards things clearly and distinctly” (E2p29s), that is, adequately (Ep. 37; E2p36, E2p40, E5p4s) and thus truly (E2p40s2, E2p44; Ep. 2, Ep. 60). “For it is when a thing is perceived by pure thought, without words or images, that it is understood” (TTP 4.10/G III 64-III 65).

To be sure, Spinoza calls universals “abstractions” and links abstractions with things that are not real (see E2p49s). But as is evident from his own unhesitant use of abstraction (as in when he says that to consider a substance truly is to abstract away (*deponere*) its modes: see E1p5d),⁵⁴ abstraction in itself does not seem to be an evil for Spinoza. Good abstraction is *rational* abstraction, the sort of abstraction from which bloom “pure notions” that explain reality as it is in itself: notions such as Extension or motion and rest (see E2p38c). Bad abstraction is imaginative abstraction, the sort of abstraction from which bloom impure notions that explain reality as it is related to sense

53 See Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 40.

54 Spinoza uses not the infinitive “*deponere*” but the perfect passive participle “*depositis*” in E1p5d: “*depositis ergo affectionibus et in se considerata, hoc est (per defin. 3. et axiom. 6.) vere considerate*.” My translation italicizes the key phrase: “the modes therefore *having been stripped off* and it [(the substance)] *having been considered in itself*, that is (by E1def6 and E1a6) *having been considered truly*.” Notice that Eliot translates “*deponere*” as “to abstract [away],” rendering the passage in question as follows: “these affections being abstracted and one substance considered in itself, i.e. (by def. 3 and [axiom 6]) rightly considered”. See George Eliot, *Ethics by Benedict de Spinoza*, ed. Thomas Deegan (Salzburg: Unstitut Für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981), E1p5d.

perception: notions such as color or smell (Ep. 6 IV/28/10-16; see also Ep. 56). When Spinoza refers to abstraction in the bad sense he refers to the sort of abstraction of which he finds the so-called schoolmen guilty: abstraction from sensorial information. And when he rejects universals, he has in mind something more like the sensible species of the schoolmen: commonalities in things discerned not by pure reason but with the tainting help of the imagination.⁵⁵

It would be wrong to think that Spinoza did a bad job at making clear the target of his attack. Given that he lacked the hindsight of seeing that there would be a realist-antirealist interpretive rift among his commentators, Spinoza was clearer than we could have expected him to be. To my mind, I have already established the central point of this section: namely, that Spinoza's infamous rejection of universals does not contradict the fact that the attributes of God are universals. But when we look to how clear Spinoza is when he lays out his attack, it is easy to draw the additional conclusion that Spinoza, as if to obviate the charge of inconsistency at hand, consciously warns readers against thinking that he rejects all universals.

Notice Spinoza's language at E2p40s1 (again, his definitive statement against universals). He is quick to make clear that he rejects "those notions, which *they* call universals" (my emphasis). He is quick to make clear, in other words, that he denies the ontological authenticity of those universals that *others* have thought to be ontologically authentic. Why this matters should be fairly obvious, especially to those aware of the early modern endeavor—often quite conscious—to break with the entrenched philosophy of Aristotelianism.

First, defining the universals he rejects from the third-person perspective is a way for Spinoza to preempt charges that he is being contradictory in rejecting universals, on the one hand, while endorsing them on the other. Notions like "man" or "triangle" or "being" or "universal" are to be rejected, according to E2p40s1, as confused and inadequate when taken according to how some *others*, some *they*, use such notions. But that does not mean that such notions are to be rejected as confused and inadequate when used *on Spinoza's own terms*. And that makes good sense in the larger context. Spinoza uses all these terms in ways that clearly he does not find problematic. He sees no problem, for example, with talking about the nature that every triangle instantiates (E1p8s2) or with characterizing shapes (unlike colors) as true universals (DPP 1prol/G I 142 line 33; see Ep. 2). He shows no hesitation to describe God not only as a being (1def6; Ep. 36) but as a "universal being" (KV 1.2/G I 24 note f; TP 2.22). He feels fine referring approvingly—and close to one hundred times in the *Ethics* alone—to the "true definition of man" (E1p8s2) and to "universal human nature" (TTP 4.6; see E4pref) and to "human nature in general" (TP 11.2; Ep. 34) and to what can be derived from that nature "as it really is" (TP 1.4) and to eternal truths inscribed in that nature (TTP 16.6) and to how that nature differs from the natures of other biological species such as horses (see E3p57s). Perhaps most importantly, only a few paragraphs after he rejects the notions "they call" universal (E2p40s1; see E2p40s2/G II 122 lines 3-11), he is completely okay with endorsing notions that *he* calls universal—notions that adequately refer to the true properties of things described at E2p37-E2p39, one of those properties being the attribute of Extension (E2p40s2/G II 122 lines 12-14, E5p12d; see E5p36s).

Second, Spinoza expects it to be obvious to his audience whom he means by "they" at E2p40s1. Consider the following facts:

55 See Fullerton, *On Spinozistic Immortality*, 34; Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, §11.2.

- (1) The scholastic philosophy, entrenched in most centers of seventeenth-century learning, was the target of those, like Spinoza, who aligned themselves with the self-styled “modern” drive to throw off the yoke of Aristotle.
- (2) Spinoza flags when he uses scholastic terminology, or refers to the scholastics. Often he will use, as we see in E2p40s1, a third-person-plural conjugation of speaking verbs (as in the case of *vocant*) and will capitalize the object of such verbs (as in the case of *Universales*). He likes to use such phrases as *ut aiunt*, “as they say” (KV 1.2/G I 22 line 23; E1p28s, E2p10s, E3p15s, Ep. 73, Ep. 75; see E4pref and E4p50s), and *Philosophi*, “the Philosophers” (KV 1.2.24, KV 1.7.2, KV 2.16/G I 81 line 38; CM 1.1/G I 234 lines 8-10, CM 2.10/G I 268 line 14; TP 4.4).
- (3) By “they” in E2p40s1 Spinoza means, as he in effect shows (G II 121 lines 13-35), those for whom universals are found out by way of abstraction from sensorial information. The universals of the schoolmen, so the audience of his day knows, are construed in precisely that way (see TTP 1.14).⁵⁶
- (4) Just a few lines earlier than the E2p40s1 section in question (but still in the same scholium), Spinoza discusses the origin of those notions that they call “second notions” and “transcendentals.” Second notions and transcendentals are classic schoolmen terms.

It seems clear, then, that by “they” Spinoza means the schoolmen, those philosophers commonly described—especially in light of their central slogan *nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*—as discovering universals by way of selective attention to sense data. Spinoza, in effect, is singling out schoolman universals, sensible species, in his official attack on universals at E2p40s1.⁵⁷

“Universal” is one of several terms in Spinoza’s philosophy (right there alongside “being,” “man,” and “attribute”) that have both a Spinoza-friendly and a Spinoza-unfriendly sense. Spinoza is often careful in his language to indicate which sense he means at a given time. Just as he inserts the phrase “what the intellect perceives” in his definition of attribute to make clear that he is talking about the authentic attributes of a substance (as opposed to the inauthentic attributes projected by the imagination), he makes sure to specify that he is merely rejecting what “they call” universals: the universals of imagination (such as those to which the schoolmen are committed), not the universals of pure thought to which he is committed. And what goes for the official rejection of universals at

⁵⁶ See Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes, 1274-1689* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 549.

⁵⁷ With exception to a few (Curley, Gaos, Cohan, Domínguez, Machado, Sensi, and also Bennett’s modernized rendering of the *Ethics*), many translations of the clause in question at E2p40s1 underemphasize or cover over that Spinoza is speaking about what some *others*, some *they*, regard as universals. Some translations do so by using passive or participle forms of the verb “to call” (instead of the present active form, *vocant*, that Spinoza uses): see A. Boyle, Eliot, Parkinson, Ratner, Gutmann, White and Stirling, Martinetti. Other translations do so by treating “*vocant*” as if it were the perfect passive participle “*vocatas*” (“called”): see Shirley, Fullerton, Daniel Smith, Willis, Hubka, Peña García, Bergua, Peri, Millet, Lurié. Other translations deemphasize the third-person perspective by using the indefinite pronoun “one” instead of “they”: see Appuhn, Saisset, Lantzenberg, Misrahi, Boulainvilliers, Van Suchtelen, Rasmussen, J. Stern, Auerbach, Von Kirchmann, Baensch, Schmidt, Bülow, Wolff, Ewald, Balling and Glazemaker. Other translations even go so far as to translate the key verb as “we call” instead of “they call”: see Elwes, Bardé.

E2p40s1 presumably goes more or less for the other passages in which Spinoza addresses universals.⁵⁸ Given the reign of the schoolmen philosophy from which the early moderns are in large part trying to break, I think Spinoza expects that when his audience hears “universals” they will think, more or less by default, of the universals of imaginative experience.

6. Concluding Remarks

The debate as to whether Spinoza is a realist concerning universals almost always takes place at the mode level of his ontology (the central issue being whether there can be features wholly present, literally identical, in more than one mode of a certain attribute). The debate centers, in particular, most often around whether Spinoza endorses universal species essences (the issue being whether there can be features wholly present, literally identical, in more than one mode of a certain attribute without being in all modes of that attribute). Elsewhere I have argued that Spinoza does accept the reality of universals at the mode level.⁵⁹ But from what I have argued here from several angles, evidence for the realist interpretation can be found even at the bedrock level of Spinoza’s ontology. The attributes themselves are universals. And as I suggest throughout this paper, there are good reasons for the stronger claim that Spinoza took himself to be committed to that view.

No doubt objections remain.⁶⁰ One thing is for sure, though. My finding that Spinoza is a realist does not sound strange in the larger context. Spinoza is, after all, both a substance monist and a rationalist. Why does that matter? Well, whereas the anti-universals worldview is historically associated with substance pluralism, the pro-universals worldview is historically associated with substance monism—the idea being that the antirealist cosmos is merely a heap of things that are more or less similar but at no level one and the same.⁶¹ And whereas the anti-universals worldview

58 Even when it comes to the three most difficult passages to reconcile with Spinoza’s realism (KV 1.6/G I 42 lines 25-I 43 lines 7-8, KV 2.16/G I 81 lines 14-20; CM 1.1/G I 235 lines 10-30, where Spinoza seems categorical about universals being nothing), the imagination is the problem. The imagination runs wild enough to posit bare types, indeterminate kinds, as obtaining independent of any token we experience. As the intellect understands the matter, however, such types concocted from specific impressions (impressions of specific men, or of specific horses, of specific acts of willing) are just tools to help us organize sensory input. If it turns out impossible, however, to reconcile such passages with Spinoza’s realism, I am open to Bennett’s way of settling the matter: these passages are the remarks of a young thinker yet to come into his settled view, a view friendlier to universals (see *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 38–39).

59 See Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, chs. 6–9. Here I argue not only (1) that there are features wholly present in each mode of a certain attribute and (2) that there are features wholly present in more than one mode of a certain attribute (without being in all modes of that attribute). I argue, in addition, that every mode is a universal in the most robust sense—that is, in the inter-substance sense, rather than just the intra-substance sense. I use a similar line of reasoning to defend the latter claim as I use to defend the claim that each attribute is a universal: were there (*per impossibile*) another substance with an exactly similar mode as the other, those two modes in question would be one and the same for Spinoza.

60 See Istvan, *Spinoza and the Problem of Universals*, esp. chapter 2-5 and 11. What if, for example, the attributes are not ontologically authentic but rather “subjective”? Well, something has got to be a universal so that proofs like E1p5d go through. I would say that the *nature* or *essence* of a Spinozistic substance—or even just the substance itself—is a universal.

61 Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, entry on “Spinoza” note A and entry on “Abelard” note; Hunt, *An Essay on Pantheism*, 147–148; Mackenzie, “Universals and Orders,” 191; Burns, “William of Ockham,” 79, 82, 91, 96;

is historically associated with empiricism, the pro-universals worldview is historically associated with rationalism—the idea being that the senses, the main avenues to reality according to empiricism, apprehend some plant or other but never some *plantness* logos.⁶²

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De Wulf, *History of Medieval Philosophy*, 154; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 48; Matteo Liberatore, *On Universals: An Exposition of Thomistic Doctrine* (London: Arts and Books Co, 1889), esp. 1, 9–10, 30; Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 4: Modern Philosophy, from Descartes to Leibniz* (New York: Image Books, 1960), 290–291; Michah Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 101; Eric Steinhart, “Pantheism and Current Ontology,” *Religious Studies* 40, no. 1 (2004): 64; Robert Stern, “Hegel, British Idealism, and the Curious Case of the Concrete Universal,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007): 134ff; Sharon Turner, *The History of England during the Middle Ages* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1830), 495n19, 512; Margaret Cameron, “William of Champeaux,” in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 1407–1409; Charles Plumtre, *General Sketch of the History of Pantheism* (London: Beacon, 1878), 299–300; Jean Jolivet, “Trois variations médiévales sur l’universel et l’individu: Roscelin, Abélard, Gilbert de la Porrée,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 97, no. 1 (1992): 112; Thomas Allbutt, *Science and Medieval Thought* (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1901), 35–36; Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, trans. James H. Tufts (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 408–410; Peter Coffey, *Epistemology: The Theory of Knowledge, an Introduction to General Metaphysics* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917), 303–304.

- 62 Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs*, 15; Armstrong, *Universals*, 76; Haserot, “The Status of Universals,” 471; Hunt, *An Essay on Pantheism*, 148; Burns, “William of Ockham,” 78, 93; Garrigou-Lagrange, *Le sens commun*, 74; Stern, “Hegel, British Idealism,” 144; Thiel, “Individuation,” 222; Turner, *The History of England*, 511; Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 1995), 19; Richard Aaron, *The Theory of Universals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), esp. 21, 86–89; David Bidney, *The Psychology and Ethics of Spinoza: A Study in the History and Logic of Ideas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 379; Friedrich Ueberweg, *History of Philosophy: From Thales to the Present Time* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1909), 11; Donald Williams, “The Elements of Being,” *Principles of Empirical Realism: Philosophical Essays* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1966), 223; Fazlur Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 41ff; Ralph Cudworth, *The Works of Ralph Cudworth*, ed. Thomas Birch (Oxford: D. A. Talboys, 1829), 404; Viren Murthy, “Universals and Infinite Modes in the Thought of Spinoza,” *Dialogue* 37, no. 2/3 (1995): 49; Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), esp. 610, 661; Errol Harris, *Salvation from Despair: A Reappraisal of Spinoza's Philosophy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 25, 61; Frank Thilly, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Holt, 1914), 254, 513.

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External Conditions, Internal Rationality:

Spinoza on the Rationality of Suicide

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Abstract

I argue alongside some other scholars that there is a plausible reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide which holds both of the following tenets: first, that suicides occur because of external conditions, and second, that there are at least some suicides which are rational. These two tenets require special attention because they seem to be the source of significant tension. For Spinoza, if one's cognitions are to be the most adequate, they must be "disposed internally" (E2p29s/G II 114), or determined more from one's own mental nature than from "fortuitous encounters" with other things (E2p29s/G II 114). It may seem there is a conflict, then, in saying both that there are rational suicides in the Spinozist framework, and that suicides must always be a result of external conditions: it seems a suicide simply cannot be *rational* if it is the result of *external* conditions. But this tension, it will be shown, can be dissolved. Once this tension is dealt with, I offer some brief closing arguments. I explain how this reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide can satisfy a call for new suicide research which avoids forms of over-individualism and epistemic injustice, and which encourages us to abolish oppressive conditions that lead to rational suicides.

Keywords: Spinoza, Suicide, Freedom, Rationality, Suicidology

Introduction

There is a modest literature on Spinoza's scattered comments on suicide.¹ I here discuss this literature and offer my own contributions to it, as well as point towards some contemporary uses of Spinoza's

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philosophy of suicide. In doing so, I argue alongside some other scholars that there is a plausible reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide that holds both of the following tenets: first, that suicides occur because of external conditions, and second, that there are at least some suicides which are rational. These two tenets require special attention because they seem to be the source of significant tension. For Spinoza, if one's cognitions are to be the most adequate, they must be "disposed internally" (E2p29s/G II 114), or determined more from one's own mental nature than from "fortuitous encounters" with other things (E2p29s/G II 114). It may seem odd, then, that there are rational suicides in the Spinozist framework, given that for Spinoza suicides must be a result of external conditions. But this tension can, I argue, be dissolved.

This paper proceeds as follows. In §1, I contextualise and describe each of Spinoza's comments on suicide. In §2, I explain what it means for something to be "rational" in the Spinozist sense, so that we can understand what I am claiming when I say that Spinoza allows for instances of rational suicide. In §3, I discuss some of the debates in the literature concerning one example of suicide that Spinoza gives (the *Seneca case*) as a potentially rational suicide. I also offer a solution to a problem posed by Grey for Nadler's view that Spinoza allows for rational suicide, and a response to a problem posed by Bennett for Spinoza's view that suicide is externally caused.² Grey's problem has not, to my knowledge, been solved by any scholar working on Spinoza's philosophy of suicide, and I aim in this section to address Grey's critique and defend Nadler's view. In §4, I turn towards explaining and relaxing the possible tension between external causation and rational suicide in the Spinozist framework. Here I will point to a passage from the TTP which helps relax the tension, as well as address a potential objection. Finally, in §5, I conclude the paper by discussing how Spinoza's philosophy of suicide could fruitfully be applied to contemporary issues in suicide studies. I argue that we can take Spinoza to be encouraging an approach to studying suicide and addressing its social causes that avoids some issues which scholars in suicide studies have found to be present in many contemporary instances of suicide research, including over-individualism and some pernicious forms of ableist epistemic injustice. The approach also encourages us to abolish the kinds of conditions in which suicide becomes a rational course of action.

1. Spinoza's Mentions of Suicide

To start any discussion of Spinoza's views on suicide, one must at least make passing mention of Spinoza's view that self-destruction is metaphysically impossible. Spinoza explicitly denies the possibility of anything being the cause of its own destruction at E3p4 (G II 145): "[n]o thing can be destroyed except through an external cause." This doctrine is of great importance to the development of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide. Bennett, for example, reads Spinoza's most important comments

supervisors Melissa Frankel and Christine Koggel for their comments and conversations surrounding this piece, as well as to my cohort peers for their comments on this piece during our research seminar at Carleton University.

2 John Grey, "Reply to Nadler: Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Suicide," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2017), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2016.1230539>; Steven Nadler, "Spinoza on Lying and Suicide," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2016): 380–388, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1084491>; and Steven Nadler, *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

on suicide as an attempt “to reconcile E3p4 with the fact of suicide,”³ and Matson reads Spinoza’s view that suicides are externally caused as being “a consequence of the principle that nothing is self-destructive.”⁴ So, it would be apt to keep the supposed impossibility of self-destruction in mind as we move to discussions of Spinoza’s philosophy of suicide, even if I must avoid a deep discussion of it, in light of this paper’s scope.⁵

As for discussions of suicide specifically, per Barbone and Rice, Spinoza mentions suicide four important times in his corpus: three times in his magnum opus the *Ethics*, and another in one of his letters.⁶ I will examine each of these four texts in this section, but will spend most of the article discussing the Seneca case, which will be the paradigmatic example of Spinozist rational suicide.

The first mention of suicide comes in the second part of the *Ethics*, when Spinoza challenges a hypothetical critique of his view that human behaviour is wholly determined. On Spinoza’s view, a human’s actions are entirely determined by the internal constitution of their body (and the mind representing that body), as well as the external conditions in which the human being finds themselves, rather than through some sort of totally undetermined free-will. One might ostensibly raise a sort of Buridan’s ass dilemma to this view. One could say that on Spinoza’s account, someone placed equidistantly from water and food, and who is equally thirsty and hungry, will waste away and die of hunger or thirst; since they are equally determined towards both food and water, they are unable to actually get to either. In such a situation, one’s desire for food is equally matched by one’s desire for water, and so one is unable to approach either. In response to this hypothetical objection, Spinoza bites the bullet and says the following:

Finally, as far as the fourth objection is concerned, I say that I grant entirely that a man placed in such an equilibrium [...] will perish of hunger and thirst. If they ask me whether such a man should not be thought an ass, rather than a man, I say that I do not know—*just as I also do not know how highly we should esteem one who hangs himself*, or children, fools, and madmen, etc. (E2p49s/G II 135, emphasis my own)

I will set aside the issue of whether Spinoza is right to bite the bullet, instead focusing on what, if anything, we can discern about Spinoza’s philosophy of suicide from this passage.

3 Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 23.

4 Wallace Matson, “Death and Destruction in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 1–4 (1977): 410.

5 Examples of problems raised against the inferences in Spinoza’s argument against self-destruction can be found at Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 235; and Michael Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” in Don Garrett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 202–203. A fairly complete discussion of these “inference problems”, and solutions to them, can be found in Jason Waller, “Spinoza on the Incoherence of Self-Destruction,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2009), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608780902986615>. Supposed counterexamples to the denial of self-destruction can be found in Wallace Matson, “Death and Destruction in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 1–4 (1977): 407–408, and solutions to these counterexamples can be found in Steven Barbone and Lee Rice, “Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1994): 239–240, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5840/ipq199434211>.

6 Barbone and Rice, “Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide,” 229.

Commentators are divided about whether there is much to consider on suicide from the passage. Matson, for example, thinks the inclusion of suicidal people here is largely “incidental,” since the inclusion of “children, fools, and madmen” reflects a Talmudic idiom, and the inclusion of “one who hangs himself” just sort of adds on to that idiom.⁷ Barbone and Rice, though, think the mention of suicide might be important: it appears at a part of the *Ethics* where Spinoza moves to an elaboration of deterministic human behaviour in contrast to uncaused free-willing, and Spinoza will later describe suicide as the result of external conditions rather than as the result of some uncaused free-will.⁸ They think that this passage, where humans are described as subject to deterministic necessity, foreshadows Spinoza’s later description of suicide as resulting from external forces.

I agree with Matson that this must be a throwaway comment. In this passage, Spinoza notes that he “does not know” how we should view suicidal people. Yet, as we will see, Spinoza has clearly thought quite a lot about suicidality and those who pursue suicide. Hence, he cannot sincerely mean he has *no* idea of how we should view those who pursue suicide. He is, it seems, likely to just be responding sarcastically to his hypothetical objector. This is in character too: he was not one to shy away from glib remarks in response to interlocutors. At E1App (G II 81), for example, while mocking those who believe that everything happens according to some final cause chosen by God, Spinoza says to such people that they “will not stop asking for the causes of causes until you take refuge in the will of God, i.e., *the sanctuary of ignorance*” (emphasis my own). I am willing to mostly disregard this passage as a sarcastic turn of phrase, likening Buridan’s ass to some incomprehensible nonsense in association with a nonchalant idiom, rather than a significant statement about Spinoza’s philosophy of suicide.

I turn now to the only mention of suicide not contained in the *Ethics*. This appearance is in a letter to the amateur theologian Willem van Blijenbergh, who had reached out to Spinoza with questions concerning one of Spinoza’s early works and its implications for God’s role in the creation and preservation of evil. At one point in the correspondence, Spinoza took van Blijenbergh to be asking the following question: “If there was a mind to whose singular nature the pursuit of sensual pleasure and knavery was not contrary, is there a reason for virtue which should move it to do good and omit evil?” (Ep 23, Spinoza to van Blijenbergh, 13 March 1665/G IV 149).

This question does not make sense to Spinoza. What it means to be a “knave,” or to behave unvirtuously, is to behave contrary to your nature (E4Pref/G II 208). So, if a person’s nature disposes them to what we call “knavery,” it would be virtuous for them to pursue “knavery” and so would not be “knavery” at all. As Spinoza puts it,

Finally, your third question presupposes a contradiction. It is as if someone were to ask: if it agreed better with the nature of someone to hang himself, would there be reasons why he should not hang himself? But suppose it were possible that there should be such a nature. Then I say (whether I grant free will or not) that if anyone sees that he can live better on the gallows than at his table, he would act very foolishly if he did not go hang himself. One who saw clearly that in fact he would enjoy a better and more perfect life or essence by being a knave than by following virtue would also be a fool if he were

7 Matson, “Death and Destruction in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” 409.

8 Barbone and Rice, “Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide,” 230.

not a knave. For acts of knavery would be virtue in relation to such a perverted human nature. (Ep 23, Spinoza to van Blijenbergh, 13 March 1665/G IV 152)

Two points can be gleaned from this passage. First, from this passage, we learn that if suicide somehow *did* follow from someone's nature, it would make sense for that person to opt for suicide. We will return to discuss this point later in the article. Second, we see that on Spinoza's account, it cannot be the case that anyone's nature includes or encourages suicide (at least considered only *in itself*), since to think of suicide as part of someone's nature (in itself) would be to "presuppose a contradiction." Presumably, this is because of Spinoza's rejection of self-destruction. We will see later on that while suicide cannot follow from a human's nature when they are considered *in themselves*, it can follow from someone's nature insofar as they are in a given set of circumstances, and so not considered solely *in themselves*.

In the next discussion of suicide, at E4p18s, we see a discussion of how suicides occur. Because "virtue," or "power" (E4def8/G II 210), is the capacity to act in accordance with our *conatus*, and the *conatus* is "[t]he striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being" (E3p7/G II 146), Spinoza holds "that those who kill themselves are weak-minded [*animo esse impotentes*] and completely conquered by external causes contrary to their nature" (E4p18s/G II 222). Those who die by suicide are, through a lack of power, conquered by external conditions that are "contrary to their nature." If one's nature is to "persevere" in being, that which is generally contrary to one's persevering in being, namely death, cannot be purely a result of one's nature. Even if, as I will argue, our *conatus* is not principally concerned with living as long as possible, it is better for us to continue to live so that we may maximise our powers, other things being equal (E4p21/G II 225).⁹ Hence, suicide must be the result of external conditions, not of our own natures.

This passage may seem unsympathetic to suicidal people, given its use of "weak-minded." But proper consideration of the role of the words "weak-minded" here removes the polemical tone. If "power" is just the capacity to act on things, in accordance with our natural striving to "persevere" in our being, then "weakness," as a lack of power, need only be read as something like "incapacity to act to persevere in one's own being." This, then, removes the polemical tone of Spinoza saying that the suicidal are "weak," and makes the claim trivial. If someone dies by suicide, they are obviously rendered incapable of acting to further persevere in their being, and so are "weak" in only a trivial sense. Indeed, the Latin that is translated as "weak-minded" is *animo esse impotentes*. Literally understood, all this means is that the mind is "impotent" or "without power," or thus "lacking the power" or "lacking the capacity." In English, "weak-minded" can imply personal failures, but in this stretch of text, "weak-minded" is a statement free of moralisation: humans, when overcome by external forces such that suicide occurs, are simply "lacking the capacity" to continue to pursue their perseverance in being.

9 As will be seen in §2, the *conatus* cannot principally be concerned with living through a longer period of time. We must thus read E4p21 as akin to something like the following, with my italicised qualification amended to the end: "no one can desire to be blessed, to act well and to live well, unless at the same time they desire to be, to act, and to live, i.e., to actually exist, *insofar as doing so allows them to continue (or go on) to be blessed or act and live well.*"

The most complete set of comments on suicide appears at E4p20s. Here, Spinoza lists three types of suicide (though we have no reason to think he considers this list exhaustive):

No one, I say, avoids food or kills himself from the necessity of his own nature. Those who do such things are compelled by external causes, which can happen in many ways. Someone may kill himself because he is compelled by another, who twists his right hand (which happened to hold a sword) and forces him to direct the sword against his heart; or because he is forced by the command of a Tyrant (as Seneca was) to open his veins, i.e., he desires to avoid a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser; or finally because hidden external causes so dispose his imagination, and so affect his Body, that it takes on another nature, contrary to the former, a nature of which there cannot be an idea in the Mind (by E3p10). But that a man should, from the necessity of his own nature, strive not to exist, or to be changed into another form, is as impossible as that something should come from nothing. Anyone who gives this a little thought will see it. (E4p20s/G II 224–225)

The first kind of suicide appears more like a murder than a suicide; the second occurs when one wishes to pursue the least evil option available, like Spinoza says Seneca did; the third occurs when one is so radically changed by external conditions that they no longer are the same thing as they were before their change. Since one of my purposes in this article is to show how only *one* of these kinds of suicide may be considered rational, we can largely ignore the first and third kinds of suicide.

Importantly, the second kind of suicide, the one which Seneca pursued, has been deemed by some Spinoza scholars a *rational* suicide, since Seneca “desires to avoid a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser” (E4p20s/G II 224) and elsewhere Spinoza claims that “[f]rom the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils” (E4p65/G II 259). It is precisely the case of Seneca’s death that provides evidence that there can be rational suicides in the Spinozist system. But, before getting into this complicated matter, I must make a significant digression concerning Spinozist rationality in general. Determining whether Seneca’s death constitutes a rational suicide demands an understanding of what it means for an act to be rational in general.

2. Freedom, Rationality, and *Conatus*

It is reason that guarantees our capacity to arrive at complete knowledge, or to arrive at “adequate ideas.” It is reason which lets us derive “adequate ideas” from other “adequate ideas” (E2p40/G II 120), and “adequate ideas” let us fully know things. This requires some explanation.

All objects in the world will have commonalities with others. All bodies, for example, have in common that they are extended, or that they move at varying speeds (E2p1312/G II 98). Those things which are common to all bodies will be perceived *adequately* by all perceivers who encounter another body which shares those commonalities (E2p38/G II 118, E2p39/G II 119–120). Since the two things in the world will share some quality P, they are able to have adequate conceptions of the thing P that they share in common as it exists in the other thing. In such a case, the idea of that which is common to both things, or the *common notion*, cannot fail to be correct. This is an adequate idea, which contrasts with inadequate ideas that result from interacting with properties of things that are not common to both of the interacting things. Adequate ideas result from either common notions,

or discursive or step-based reasoning concerning those common notions,¹⁰ or a sort of well-informed immediate intuitional grasp¹¹—in light of one’s already held knowledge of common notions or what is derived from them (E2p40s2/G II 122).¹²

Further, being rational, and behaving in ways that generate adequate ideas, is equivalent to our being free. Spinoza tells us that someone who “is led by reason” is who he calls “a free man” (E4p66s/G II 260): a “free man, *i.e.*, *one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone*” (E4p67d/G II 261, emphasis my own). So, understanding what it is to be a rational person, or for an act to be rational, amounts to understanding what it is for a person or act to be free in the Spinozist sense. Yet understanding Spinozist freedom and rationality requires also understanding more completely a basic Spinozist concept: the *conatus* doctrine.

Each thing in the universe, by its respective nature, is engaged in a striving to “persevere” in its being (E3p7/G II 146). However, the *conatus*, or this striving, is not aimed merely at persisting through a longer amount of time (E3p8/G II 147). As Della Rocca notes, for Spinoza, “from x’s essence alone it cannot be determined how long x will exist.”¹³ Spinoza makes the relative unimportance of durational existence clear in his description of a thing’s being perfect:

By perfection in general I shall, as I have said, understand reality, *i.e.*, the essence of each thing insofar as it exists and *produces an effect*, having *no regard to its duration*. For no singular thing can be called more perfect for having persevered in existing for a longer time (E4Pref/G II 209, emphasis my own).

Now, one’s *conatus* is one’s power of acting on other things, and the strength of this power is equivalent to one’s degree of virtue (E4d8/G II 210).¹⁴ Naturally, we strive to increase this power, to be more virtuous. Everything, from humans, to rocks, to tables, is constantly striving to increase their powers to act on other things.¹⁵ Because we all naturally strive for the expansion of our powers, we most properly call those things “good” which lead to the expansion of our powers to produce effects on other things, or which lead to the perfection of our natures. E4d1 (G II 209) states that “By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us,” where “useful” means “what

10 What Spinoza calls the “second kind of knowledge” (E2p40s2/G II 122).

11 What Spinoza calls the “third kind” of knowledge (E2p40s2/G II 122).

12 I henceforth consider us as “rational,” or using “reason,” when we behave in any of these ways that produce adequate ideas, although in this section on adequate ideas Spinoza only calls the second kind of knowledge “reason” (E2p40s2/G II 122).

13 Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” 203.

14 Youpa emphasises “Spinoza’s identification of an individual’s *conatus* with adequate causal power” and notes that “[t]he best way of life is that which follows from our actual essence,” which includes pursuing joys, since they are symptomatic of increases in our power and thus indicate that we are acting towards our natural pursuit of power. See: Andrew Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4. For Youpa’s complete analysis and argument for this reading, see Ch 1-3.

15 Della Rocca, for example, suggests that the *conatus* doctrine posits that “each thing not only strives to persist in existence, but also strives to prevent any decrease in what Spinoza calls power of acting (*agendi potentia*) and indeed strives to do whatever will increase its power of acting.” Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” 210.

increases... our power of acting" (E4p8d/G II 215). As Youpa puts it, "An increase in an individual's power as a whole is a genuine enhancement of his nature."¹⁶

I will now return to the Spinozist sense of freedom. Something "is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone" (E1Def7/G II 46). We are free when we act as a result of our own nature, and, by the *conatus* doctrine, our nature encourages us to increase our powers of activity. When we act in accordance with our *conatus*, we are free. The free person is juxtaposed to someone who acts not from their own nature, but rather from the influence of things external to them. We are unfree when we are determined to act not from our own natural rationality (since freedom and rationality, as mentioned, are interchangeable), but from external compulsion. When we are unfree, we are pushed around in the universe like billiard balls. When we are free, we are pushed about by ourselves, by our own natures. When we are free or when we behave rationally, we act to know things from the necessity of our own instantiated being and to increase our power.

Different behaviours or thoughts, though, will be free and rational when situated in different contexts. One especially fruitful reading of Spinozist rationality and freedom that articulates this point comes from Hasana Sharp.¹⁷ On Sharp's reading, since Spinozist reason or freedom is a mind's arriving at adequate ideas more from its own *actual* nature than from external natures, "reason [...] is not necessarily universal in content [...] (rather) Reason is the power of a particular mind to generate ideas from its idiosyncratic, singular nature."¹⁸ This reading is corroborated by Spinoza's view that essences are instantiated in a world that provides different opportunities for power expansion for different singular people, and limits different people's powers in different, often unexpected ways: "it is clear that we are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that, like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate" (E3p59s/G II 189). So, while we may agree or pursue the same things by reason insofar as we are human, we disagree by reason insofar as we are differently situated and so we must often pursue different things. For this reason, Sharp suggests that "[w]e can reasonably disagree... since what supports my nature, what enables me to continue to be, is not necessarily what supports your being."¹⁹

Yet Spinoza claims, for example, that when we are rational we will agree with each other (E4p35/G II 232). Sharp reads these kinds of passages as suggesting that, though we are differently situated, reason compels us generally to find similarities with others and work together for our own advantage. While it might be rational for me to do something and irrational for you to do the same thing, it is rational for us to understand and agree why that thing may be rational for one person and not for another, and it will also be rational for us to work towards those things which are good for each of us by way of what we do have in common, namely our *conatus*. Sharp notes:

16 Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy*, 28.

17 An alternative account that gets at something similar, where freedom comes in degrees depending on one's relational position with the world, can be found in Caroline Williams, "Revisiting Spinoza's Concept of Conatus: Degrees of Autonomy," in Aurelia Armstrong, Keith Green, and Andrea Sangiacomo, eds., *Spinoza and Relational Autonomy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). On Williams' reading of Spinoza, "the relational autonomy of bodies of all kinds will be constituted by and through degrees of power," Williams, "Revisiting Spinoza's Concept of Conatus," 123.

18 Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 95.

19 Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, 96.

When Spinoza exclaims that ‘men who are governed by reason—that is, men who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage—want nothing for themselves which they do not desire for other men’ (E4p18s), recall that what rational men want is simply greater power to think (know God, or nature) and act. Rational desires might involve general precepts, such as to cultivate our capacities as modes of thought and extension through self-diversification, but what contributes to self-enhancement and the content of self-knowledge is not identical for each and every human being.²⁰

We have here a reading which allows that it is rational for everyone to pursue what is best for their *conatus*, and for everyone to understand this universal pursuit. What is actually involved in that pursuit will, though, differ depending on our respective situations. This reading manages to make sense, too, of some of Spinoza’s other maxims. For example, Spinoza notes that, contrary to common reasoning, things are not good or bad purely in themselves, but rather have value only in relation to other things which strive in accordance with their respective *conatus*:

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves [...]. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, Music is good for one who is Melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf. (E4Pref/G II 208)

Spinoza does not explain why exactly music is supposedly good for the melancholic, bad for the mourning, and neither good nor bad for the deaf, but this is enough to see that differently situated people should value different things.

Another preliminary note should here be made. Because Spinoza explicitly tells us that “[i]t is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause” (E4p4/G II 212), we must grant that we cannot ever be absolutely free. No matter what, because we are situated in a universe full of things that impact us, we cannot always and only act from our own natures. We may only do our best to be as free as possible. We must thus accept that we are always only free to different degrees, and hence only rational to differing degrees.²¹ Some passages hint at this explicitly. For example, Spinoza writes that “[i]n life, therefore, it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, *or* reason” (emphasis in original) (E4App4/G II 267). The “as far as we can” (*quantum possumus*) here is telling; we should always be striving to be as free as possible, even if we cannot be absolutely free.²²

20 Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, 99.

21 Again, see Williams, “Revisiting Spinoza’s Concept of Conatus,” for an alternate reading of Spinoza that gets to this same point. Youpa also shares the view that, for Spinoza, humans are free *in degrees*, but holds the interesting position that we can still be said to be “genuinely free,” even if not “in the absolute sense” (Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy*, 138–139).

22 This is to ignore the complicated issues posed by Part V of the *Ethics*, which is concerned with the mind’s freedom or, ultimately, “blessedness” (E5pref/G II 277). It turns out that some version of freedom must be found in the intellectual love of God (E5p36s/G II 303). All this despite Spinoza’s own admission that, when it comes to externally

With Spinozist freedom and rationality briefly explained, it should be clear why I say that there is a *prima facie* tension between there being rational suicides, which are thus freely and internally caused, and the Spinozist view that suicides are always “externally” caused. Before resolving this tension, let’s consider Seneca’s death and why Spinoza thinks it constitutes a *rational* suicide.

3. The Seneca Case

In book 15 of Tacitus’ *The Annals*, we learn of Seneca’s death. The Roman tyrant Nero had uncovered a plot to overthrow him, and had, using threat of torture against one of the plotters, concluded that the statesman and Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca was involved in the plot. It is unclear whether Seneca was actually culpable: Tacitus writes that the plotter who implicated Seneca did so “either as having been a messenger between him and Piso (another plotter), or to win the favour of Nero, who hated Seneca and sought every means for his ruin.”²³ In any case, as consequence for his alleged involvement in the plot, Nero ordered Seneca’s death by suicide. Seneca then, on the command of Nero, opted to die by suicide, and on Spinoza’s reading avoids “a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser” (E4p20s/G II 224). Opting for suicide rather than disobeying Nero makes some intuitive sense, given that Nero was wont to ruthless vengeance. Tacitus writes that another plotter “was dragged off to a place set apart for the execution of slaves, and butchered by the hand of the tribune Statius.”²⁴ Evidence thus indicated that Seneca’s available options were limited either to a death at his own hands, an option that enabled him to first speak with his wife and other companions and then choose his method of death, or to face the consequences of Nero’s wrath, an option that could mean a horrible public execution or grueling torture. Seneca, on Spinoza’s reading, is thus “forced by the command of the tyrant” (Nero) to die by suicide, in light of its being the least evil of the available options.

The Seneca case is a difficult one. Some commentators insist that, on the Spinozist view, we must count Seneca’s suicide as rational, or at least hold that Seneca’s suicide “was to some extent virtuous,”²⁵ while others read Spinoza as intending to strictly prohibit rational or virtuous suicides. Among the former camp are Nadler and LeBuffe, and among the latter are Grey and Matson.²⁶ To keep the discussion focused, I will concentrate on Nadler and Grey’s discussions of the issue and call this debate the Nadler-Grey debate. While Nadler offers a compelling argument for reading Seneca’s suicide as rational, I do not think Nadler has adequately addressed Grey’s important

caused affects, the power of the mind “does not have an absolute dominion over them” (E5pref/G II 277). This portion of the *Ethics* is famously hard to interpret. In a well-known passage, Bennett calls the later portions of Part V “an unmitigated and seemingly unmotivated disaster” (Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 357).

23 Tacitus, “The Annals, Book 15” trans. Alfred John Church and Jackson Brodribb (1876), [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Annals_\(Tacitus\)/Book_15](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Annals_(Tacitus)/Book_15), §56.

24 Tacitus, “The Annals, Book 15,” §60.

25 Michael LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 192.

26 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, Ch 9; Nadler, “Spinoza on Lying and Suicide”; Lebuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, 192; Grey, “Reply to Nadler”; Matson, “Death and Destruction in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” 410.

challenge to this reading.²⁷ In what follows, I will offer my own response to Grey's objection to help establish that Spinoza does, indeed, allow for rational suicide.

Some, like Bennett, have argued also that the whole Spinozist account of Seneca's suicide as the result of external causes is untenable, while others, like Barbone and Rice, have, I contend, solved the putative problems in a satisfying way.²⁸ I will call this second debate the Bennett-BR (for Barbone and Rice) debate.

The two debates are, of course, related. The Nadler-Grey debate deals with Seneca's rationality, which, as we saw in §2 of this article, is interchangeable with Seneca's freedom. The Bennett-BR debate deals with whether or not Seneca's suicide was self-caused, which, as we saw in §2 of this paper, is also a question concerning Spinozist freedom and rationality. I deal with each of these debates separately but note the importance of their convergence. What these debates end up clarifying are, respectively, the ways that Seneca's suicide is both "free" and also "externally caused." Let us deal first with the Nadler-Grey debate.

3.1. The Nadler-Grey Debate

The Nadler-Grey debate concerns whether Spinoza admits the metaphysical possibility of rational suicides. The Seneca case is especially important to those, like Nadler, who hold that Spinoza allows for rational suicide; Seneca's death is thought to be the paradigmatic example of such a suicide. But for others, like Grey, different aspects of Spinoza's thought rule out any instance of rational suicide. We will look at both views, and I will offer a reply to Grey's critique of Nadler.

Nadler reiterates that our *conatus*, our striving to persevere in our being, is not merely about temporal duration. The *conatus* has the rational person strive for "not mere continued durational existence but the preservation of his perfected nature, his condition of rational virtue, his extraordinary power of thinking and understanding—in short, his joy."²⁹ Other passages from the *Ethics* suggest as much, too. Consider that Spinoza generally prohibits lying, noting that "[a] free man always acts honestly, not deceptively" (E4p72/G II 264), and this general prohibition on lying stands even in cases where we could save our lives by lying (E4p72s/G II 264). So, what the "free" or "rational" person must be pursuing in accordance with their *conatus* must be something besides simple, durational existence, or else they could lie to save themselves whenever needed. So, purely in terms of the *conatus*, rationality does not *always* exclude dying, or the pursuit of death.

If we want to be "rational" to as great a degree as we can, and hence act in accordance with our *conatus*, we must be more concerned with our capacities to have effects on other things than with our capacity to extend our existence through a longer duration. As discussed in §2, the "free" or "rational" person must pursue a greater power of activity. Since Spinoza also holds that "[j]oy is a man's passage from a lesser to a greater perfection" (E3def aff2/G II 191) and that "[s]adness is

27 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 223, note 6, quickly provides a train of thought against Grey's critique by mentioning that some passages of the *Ethics* suggest that the free person is aware of their mortality. But, it is not enough that the free person is aware of their mortality (i.e. can have adequate ideas of things after their death); rather, on Grey's reading, the free person specifically needs to adequately consider the *quality* of a situation when they perish vs. when they do not.

28 Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, §56; Barbone and Rice, "Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide."

29 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 163.

a man's passage from a greater to a lesser perfection" (E3def aff3/G II 191), we can allow that (1) when we pass to a state with some degree more joy we experience an increase of our powers, and so, *ceteris paribus*, we should pursue joy; and (2) when we pass to a state with some degree more sadness we experience a decrease of our powers, and so, *ceteris paribus*, we should avoid sad states.

These notes give us the necessary preliminary information for Nadler's view of the Seneca example. Nadler points out that Spinoza claims that Seneca aims "to avoid a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser" (E4p20s/G II 224), and that Spinoza elsewhere explicitly says that "[f]rom the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils" (E4p65/G II 259). As such, it seems that Seneca would be acting "from the guidance of reason" in his pursuit of suicide. A death by suicide is also, presumably, more joyful or less sad than a death at the hands of Nero. In preserving his power of activity, and his most joyful possible state, Seneca elects to die by suicide, and so suffers the lesser evil in comparison to a constricted and much more painful or humiliating death at the hands of Nero.³⁰ Seneca represents, it seems, the paradigmatic case of rational suicide. As we saw in Sharp's reading of Spinozist rationality, freedom comes in degrees, and in exercising his rationality, Seneca exercises whatever degree of freedom is available to him in this tragically restrictive situation.

Nadler anticipates some objections. First, an objector could note that for Spinoza, one who is born free and remains free never experiences sadness since they never hold any thoughts of the bad (E4p68/G II 261), but suicide is sad, and so suicide is never thought of and thus pursued by the free or rational person. But, Nadler replies, Spinoza also explicitly notes that it is impossible to actually be born free (E4p4/G II 212). Such a state is purely hypothetical. The freest actual person, the *actual* person with the greatest degree of freedom, could still be affected by sadness in some cases, and still be acting based on rational deliberation and not primarily as a result of a sad passion.³¹

Next, and similarly, an objector might suggest that, since Spinoza insists that rational behaviour is always joyful behaviour, and suicide is not joyful, suicide cannot be rational. Indeed, as we have seen, what is good leads to perfection, and so must be joyful, but Spinoza notes that "[b]y a Desire arising from reason, we directly follow the good" (E4p63c/G II 258), and presumably we do not find suicide joyful. But, again, Nadler points out that Spinoza notes that the lesser of two evils is properly regarded as a good (E4p65c/G II 259–260), at least to some degree, and so will not be properly seen as "sad" (in the Spinozist sense) as the objector suggests.³²

So, Nadler thinks he has defended an account of Spinoza that allows the possibility of rational suicides. Interestingly, Nadler writes in one of his endnotes that Grey has replied to his position,³³ and only offers minimal discussion as reply.³⁴ Here I describe Grey's reply to Nadler's view, and then show how Nadler could avoid the difficulty Grey presents.

On Grey's reading, Spinoza explicitly holds it impossible that we can have an adequate idea of something which excludes our own existence (E3p10/G II 148), and Grey thinks that for a suicide to be rational, we would need an adequate idea of the situation that includes our own death to compare

30 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 169–170.

31 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 165.

32 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 167.

33 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 222, note 18.

34 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 223, note 6.

it against the situation where we continue to exist. Obviously, our own death excludes our existence, and so it would not seem that Spinoza allows for us to have an adequate idea of such a situation. Grey writes:

In order for his (Seneca's) suicide to be a free and rational action, he would also have needed an adequate knowledge of his own death and its relative goodness or badness for him. Yet, as I have argued, Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine entails that nobody can have such knowledge.³⁵

The solution to Grey's critique is like so: for the Spinozist, we need not have an adequate idea of anything which happens after our death in our rational considerations of suicide, and so we need not have an adequate idea which excludes our existence.

Consider the following: Seneca knows that in the scenario where he does not pursue suicide, he will experience tremendous misery and sadness at the hand of Nero. However, in the scenario where he pursues suicide, up until he pursues the suicide, his high degree of joy (only relative to the situation in which he does not pursue suicide) is unaffected. What happens after he dies is irrelevant for Seneca's purposes, since he will no longer exist.³⁶ It does not matter for the sake of Seneca's decision that he consider his death, properly speaking, but only the amount of joy or sadness, and thus his levels of perfection, up until his death, including the process of dying, in either situation. Given his knowledge of the expected amount of joy or misery in the time leading up to his death (including the process of dying) in both situations, Seneca is still able to exercise what degree of freedom he has access to, and make a rational decision about which scenario is superior. There is, then, still the possibility for rational suicide on Spinozist grounds, despite Grey's objection.

One might raise issues here by pointing out that, for Spinoza, at least some parts of our souls or minds persist after death (E5p23/G II 295), so Seneca would actually have reason to consider what happens after his death, insofar as the wellbeing of the immortal parts of his soul is concerned. But this issue can also be avoided. What makes Seneca *Seneca* is also his body, given that his mind, properly speaking, is just the idea of his body (E2p11–13/G II 94–96). So, whatever bits of Seneca which persist after his body dies are no longer enough to properly constitute *Seneca*, since his mind, being the same thing as his body but considered under a different attribute, cannot be what it was when it was *Seneca*. As such, whatever bits of Seneca that persist after his death are irrelevant in considering whether suicide is rational for *Seneca*.

One further complication to this solution may lay in the fact that there remains, eternally, an idea which expresses the body (E5p22/G II 295). If this is the case, it seems that Seneca proper may stick around after death, so to speak, more than I am claiming he does. But it seems clear that Spinoza's claim here does not mean Seneca proper continues existing as he did when alive, since after death it is explicit that the eternal mind, even when expressing the eternal body, can no longer

³⁵ Grey, "Reply to Nadler," 387.

³⁶ At most, Seneca basing his ideas or actions on what happens after his death would contribute a degree of rationality to his decision. If this *were* the case, and was indeed impossible given Grey's view that we cannot have adequate ideas of what happens after our death, it would still only represent a *degree* of rationality which is trumped by the degree to which we are empowered or restricted by decisions *during* our life. See also my footnote 44.

remember or imagine things (E5p21/G II 294). The thing which persists after Seneca's death as eternal mind (and as idea of the eternal body) is sufficiently changed to no longer be Seneca proper.^{37, 38}

One might also raise the following objection: surely the rationality of an action depends at least somewhat on its potential *outcomes*, and so, when Seneca is pursuing suicide, he must think of its outcomes to determine its rationality. However, for Seneca to do this properly, he requires having an adequate idea of what would happen after his suicide, which, as we saw Grey argues, Seneca cannot have. Indeed, the objector may point to Spinoza's own life to make this point: Spinoza's *Ethics* was not publicly published while he was alive. It was only after Spinoza's death that the *Ethics* became the unusually influential text which it has since become, even if while alive word had gotten around about Spinoza's views and some of the contents of the *Ethics*. Still, despite the writing of the *Ethics* not having maximal impact on Spinoza during his life, writing the *Ethics* was rational: its positive outcome, beyond Spinoza's death, shows this.³⁹

To this, I offer the following. Of course, the outcomes of an action are important for one to determine its rationality, but *only* when one will continue to exist after that action is taken and thus be impacted by its outcomes. Recall: an action's rationality is determined by how much it aids one's striving to persevere in being, and so an act is always rational *in relation to a conative perspective*. When I am thirsty and drink a glass of water, acting towards my replenishment makes the act rational *for me*. With my thirst quenched, I will be more able to act in accordance with the demands of my *conatus*, and so it is rational *for me* to drink a glass of water. This act is totally arational (neither rational nor irrational) for others, it simply has no bearing on their striving and so it simply makes no sense to talk of its rationality for them; to think otherwise would be to make a category error. This is not to say that nothing anyone else ever does matters for us, Spinoza is quite clear that having

37 An alternative reply to this objection may be developed following LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, Ch 12, wherein it is argued that when Spinoza speaks of the mind existing after the destruction of the body, he is really just considering the goods of the mind *separately* from the body: "Part of what (Spinoza thinks) is false about traditional (religious) views, however, and what Spinoza will replace, is the view that mind endures after the body's death. The second half of Part 5 [of the *Ethics*] should be understood, rather, as an account of the human good considered, not after the body, but without relation to the body" (LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, 210).

38 My argument here could be problematized by the array of authors who think Spinoza holds in Part V of the *Ethics* that the eternal mind constitutes personal immortality. If this is indeed the case, then Seneca will have to consider the impacts his actions would have on him after his mortal death. However, many contemporary commentators do not think Spinoza allows for personal immortality. Authors who seem to support Spinozist personal immortality include: Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1934), vol. 2, 318; Harry M. Tiebout, "Deus, Sive Natura...", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 16, no. 4 (1956): 512–521; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (New York: Harvester, 1988), 198–200 (his discussion of Hannibal); Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 375; Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 259. Authors who agree with me and oppose such a personal reading include: Clare Carlisle, "Spinoza On Eternal Life," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2015), <https://dx.doi.org/10.5840/acpq201412842>; Mogens Lærke, "Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie* 55, no. 2 (2016): 269, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0012217316000445>; Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 183; Dan Taylor, *Spinoza and the Politics of Freedom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 76.

39 This line of objection, and the example of Spinoza's writing the *Ethics*, comes from a reviewer report on my initial submission to the *Journal of Spinoza Studies*. I am indebted to the reviewer for pointing it out and thus prompting me to address it.

capable, rational, and kind friends and community members is a good (E4p35–E4p37s1/G II 232–237), but just that what is rational is ultimately so in relation to a given conative perspective.⁴⁰

Now, for Seneca, if suicide does indeed end his life, then nothing after his death can possibly have any impact on his suicide's rationality. Again, after his death, rationality simply doesn't enter the question. After Seneca's death, there will be no more Seneca whose *conatus* can be strengthened or harmed, and so nothing after his death can play a role in determining his suicide's rationality. The same is true, I suppose, for Spinoza's writing the *Ethics*. While it would have been nice for him to have seen how much his work has held influence (or stirred up controversy) historically, the popularity of the *Ethics* in the time since Spinoza's death has no impact on Spinoza's *conatus* (indeed, his *conatus* is long gone), and so does not bear on the rationality of his writing the *Ethics* during his life. While writing the *Ethics* and discussing it with his inner-circle no doubt was rational for Spinoza insofar as it improved his thinking and led him to develop what he took to be adequate ideas (and also imparted those ideas in his peers), its rationality for him is not impacted by its popularity of influence after his death. Even if we wanted to say that somehow Spinoza's eternal mind enjoyed the benefits of writing the *Ethics* after his death (which would be controversial, see footnote 41), once Spinoza died the eternal portion of his mind would be unaffected by worldly matters. It would no longer change, since it would no longer have an extended body which was affected by the world after his death (E5p21d/G II 294–295), and so it would only enjoy those benefits which it enjoyed during the process of working out the *Ethics*, as opposed to any benefits created by its influence.⁴¹

Similarly, in considering the rationality of his suicide, Seneca need only consider the outcomes up until the point of his death. Afterwards, there will simply be no *conatus* for rationality to be relevant to. So, again, he need not have an adequate idea of what happens after his death.

It should be clear now that Nadler's view that Seneca's death constitutes a rational suicide, insofar as it exercises what degree of freedom Seneca maintains, is apt. Rational suicides are thus possible in the Spinozist view. This view survives Grey's attack. Seneca may need an adequate idea of the long-term outcomes of his actions for considering whether most acts are rational, but if he intends to die he need only consider the outcomes up until his death, as afterwards there will be no relevant *conatus* for things to strengthen or harm.⁴²

40 I think also that the rationality of, say, Spinoza's posthumous publication of the *Ethics* can be considered from the conative perspective of e.g., the philosophical community or of Spinoza's peers and thus could be rational or irrational in those lights, though it would be arational for Spinoza considered in himself.

41 "The Mind neither expresses the actual existence of its Body, nor conceives the Body's affections as actual, except while the Body endures" (E5p21d/G II 294). So, the eternal mind is unaffected by external events after the body's death, since the only way the mind is impacted externally is by affects, and Spinoza defines all affects as necessarily occurring through the body, even if they are paralleled by mental affections (ideas of the bodily affections): "By affect I understand affections of the Body by which the Body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections" (E3d3/G II 139). I must thank Kristin Primus for pointing out during the editorial process that I could here mention the eternal mind's (plausible) immutability.

42 I should note that the objector could potentially continue to argue with me here that e.g., doing something which aids others after death must be rational since "all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all" (E4p18s/G II 223). But even if this counts as providing a *degree* of rationality, or follows from adequate ideas or good reasoning *to a degree*, one must prioritise their own power maximisation, since that is fundamentally the priority of our striving. Concerning oneself with the least evil option, which may in tragic circumstances be suicide,

3.2 The Bennett-BR Debate

Bennett is not convinced that Spinoza's view is coherent at all, and he thinks that to speak of Nero as "forcing" Seneca to die by suicide is absurd. Bennett has us consider the following: suppose you prefer eating apples to eating oranges. Now suppose we have an apple and some oranges in our possession. I then eat the only apple. Have I thus "forced" you to eat an orange? Bennett's answer is a firm "no." If you eat an orange after I have eaten the apples, that was of your own volition. Bennett treats this case as analogous to the Seneca case. Seneca presumably prefers to go on living his normal life rather than die, but Nero takes away his option to go on living his normal life, and so Nero supposedly forces Seneca to die. But, per Bennett, the apple-orange example supposedly shows that this is not how we should see the situation. On Bennett's view, just as I have not forced you to eat the orange, Nero has not forced Seneca to die by suicide; that was Seneca's own doing.⁴³

Bennett anticipates a reply to the apple-orange example: he warns us *not* to say the difference in the two scenarios is one of a sort of "Strong" vs. "Weak" influence. That is, we cannot think Nero's influence is of a "Strong" kind and my influence in the apple-orange example is of a "Weak" kind. Bennett suggests that in both cases the influence is *decisive*, a course of action becomes inevitable given the situation. The strong/weak distinction is not relevant. Supposedly, since I do not force you to eat the orange by eating an apple (and thus render your eating the orange inevitable), Nero does not force Seneca to die by suicide.⁴⁴

Barbone and Rice start us on a reply to the apple-orange objection. The Seneca case and the apple-orange case are not similarly decisive. In the Seneca case, the available options to Seneca are, for all intents and purposes, exhaustive. Either Seneca will die by suicide, or he will be taken by Nero's forces and suffer a worse fate. In the apple-orange case, as Bennett gives it, if I eat the only apple and there are now only oranges, you can still leave my company, pop over to Walmart, and procure a nice honey crisp. The option-set of eating an apple or an orange is not exhaustive in the same way as the Seneca case is, so the influence that I have on you when I eat the apple is not decisive in the same sense as Nero's influence on Seneca is. To make the situations more alike, Barbone and Rice suggest the following revised version:

Suppose that the conditions are such that you must and will eat a piece of fruit, and that all that is available is an apple, an orange, and a banana. Furthermore, suppose that you are so built that you prefer an apple to an orange, and an orange to everything else. If I eat our only apple, have I forced you to select an orange? Yes. And so likewise Nero has forced Seneca to kill himself.⁴⁵

When one shows the exhaustivity of the option-set, by including the qualifiers that you must and will eat a fruit, my own intuition is the same as Barbone and Rice's: just as Nero forced Seneca to die, I forced you to eat an orange. In light of this, those who share this intuition can say that the

has a higher degree of adequacy. Again, I must thank Kristin Primus for prompting me to mention degrees of adequacy in this section.

43 Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 237.

44 Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 237.

45 Barbone and Rice, "Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide," 232–233.

apple-orange issue is resolved. Bennett's analogical argument fails because the analogy is not sufficiently similar to the Seneca case, and so Bennett fails to raise doubt that Seneca's death was externally forced by Nero.

Of course, the apple-orange scenario does get at *something* about the Seneca case, especially the revised, more accurate version provided by Barbone and Rice: Seneca is forced into a situation where his only options are to die by suicide or refuse and suffer a worse fate. That is, like the revised apple-orange scenario, he is forced to pick one of the available options, and which options those are is forced upon him. However, as we saw in the discussion of the Nadler-Grey debate, it is rational to pick the lesser evil. So, for Seneca, pursuing suicide is free, since it is rational, even if Nero forces it to occur. You may be forced to choose a fruit, but you may still freely choose the greater one, insofar as doing so is more rational. In this sense, Seneca still exercises his available degree of freedom, even if he is forced by Nero to do so.

Bennett raises another issue as well: it seems like Seneca's death must have followed from his own nature. Bennett poses a problem, where no matter how we read "essence" with regards to Seneca's essence, it will be untenable to consider Seneca's death a suicide. On Bennett's view, if Spinoza means that Seneca is killed by forces external to his instantiated nature at the time of his death, then Spinoza is simply wrong, since clearly Seneca's actual instantiated body at the time of his death (i.e., some subset of all the instantiated things pertaining to "Seneca" that allow him to act on the world) supplied the force necessary for his death. Just as Seneca's body acts on the world, it acted on himself in pursuing suicide. On the other hand, if Spinoza means here that Seneca's death was caused by forces external to his essence insofar as it constitutes only those things that *essentially* compose Seneca, then Seneca would have been killed by some "accidental" property of his (it would have to be some property of Seneca to be a suicide). But, if this were the case, then Spinoza would be committed to banning self-destruction only in some weak sense, where a thing's necessary properties may never be the cause of self-destruction, but a thing's *accidental* properties could cause it to self-destruct. Yet, Spinoza makes it clear that "[n]o thing can be destroyed except through an external cause" (emphasis my own) (E3p4/G II 145), and so it should not be the case that even accidental properties may be the cause of self-destruction, since "no thing" at all can self-destruct. In either case, Bennett thinks, Spinoza cannot account for the fact that Seneca's death must have been caused by some amount of force in Seneca's body.⁴⁶

Again, though, this problem can be dealt with, and I here offer my own solution. What was Seneca's own doing was the pursuit of a lesser evil, which in this case was forced by Nero to be suicide. Again, what is rational and thus follows from Seneca's nature, in either way that Bennett reads Seneca's essence, is his pursuit of the best possible outcome. But the options available, and thus what that best possible outcome actually is, is the result of Nero's actions. In this sense, the suicide was forced by Nero, and not by Seneca's capacities. Insofar as Nero forced the option-set to include only suicide and options worse than suicide, Nero forced Seneca to die by suicide. In our discussion of Bennett, we must recall the following from §2: insofar as humans are differently situated, different options are better for them. That is, different options are more rational or indicate more freedom than other options in different situations. But, insofar as we all partake in humanity, the same things are true for all of us. All humans "require continuous and varied food" (E4App27/

46 Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 238.

G II 274), but if I am starving, and must eat as soon as possible, and am actually situated in a diner, and you are similarly starving and actually situated in a coffee shop (and we both have enough money and the kinds of dietary and religious/moral views that allow us to eat the relevant foods), then the actual foods most available to fill our requirements will be different. Similarly, as we have already seen, we should all pursue the least available evil or the greatest available good (E4p65/G II 259), and so we exhibit freedom when doing so. But what those goods or evils actually are is often determined by external circumstances. Seneca is forced to die by suicide by Nero, even if he may pursue the least available evil by virtue of his own nature. This circumvents the problem posed by Bennett: what is external is Seneca's surrounding context, or the tyranny of Nero, which forced Seneca's options to be so limited. While Seneca's opting for the least available evil, or his use of rational judgement, counts as internal rationality, his death is still externally caused by Nero's influence.

4. Squaring External Causes and Internal Rationality

Spinoza thus holds both that all suicides are externally caused, and also that there are rational suicides. But this is a potential source of great tension: how can Spinoza hold that a suicide can be both rational and externally caused, if what it means for an action to be "rational" is that it results from our own internal natures? I here describe Nadler's way of relieving this tension, then give my own solution by turning to a particular passage of Spinoza's TTP that I think to be especially enlightening.

Nadler, again, rightly points out that Spinoza holds that humans are caught up in a world full of external causes which unavoidably act on them.⁴⁷ Spinoza makes this quite clear: "It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause" (E4p4/G II 212). So, when we ask that someone be "rational," we cannot ask that they act in an entirely self-caused and thus rational manner. This is beyond the realm of possibility. We can ask only that people be as rational as possible, so exercising a maximal degree of freedom, given their circumstances. Nadler has us dissolve the tension by holding that, in the case of rational suicides, external causes force suicide to be the least of the available evils to someone, and yet internally motivated rationality forces someone to pursue the lesser of the available evils, i.e., suicide. They thus act rationally insofar as they act "as rationally as possible":

one can be trapped, even "defeated," by one's circumstances, and an action can be "compelled by external causes [*causis externis coactus*]" in the sense that one must choose only among certain available options, and yet the outcome can still be a free and rational act: there may simply be no better alternatives and so one chooses what seems best, from the perspective of reason.⁴⁸

47 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 168.

48 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 169.

In my view, this is a perfectly fine way of dissolving the tension, and is also mirrored by others like LeBuffe, who writes in a very short discussion of the Seneca case that:

Spinoza's discussion of the case at 4p20s suggests that Seneca's action was right, given the alternative, but also—what perhaps philosophers like Seneca who endorse suicide with less qualification do not acknowledge readily enough—that any circumstances in which suicide is the right thing to do are also circumstances in which a person's freedom has been tragically reduced.⁴⁹

LeBuffe thus holds that Seneca is rational to pursue the least available evil, but also that his “freedom” has been “tragically reduced” by Nero's tyrannical ways. Seneca is acting to as rational a degree as possible, but Nero still, as an external condition, forces suicide to be the most rational option.

Still, there is more to be said, given an interesting comment in the TTP. Spinoza tells us quite explicitly that it is never possible for someone to surrender all their freedom, even in the most brutal cases of tyranny, cases much like Seneca's. People always maintain some degree of freedom. Indeed, “it must be granted that each person reserves to himself many things of which he remains the master, things which therefore depend on no one's decision but his own” (TTP 17/G III 201–202). Whenever one does something without being physically forced to, they are, to at least some small degree, doing it of their own “judgement”:

For whatever reason a man resolves to carry out the commands of the supreme ‘power, whether because he fears punishment, or because he hopes for something from it, or because he loves his Country, or *because he has been impelled by any other affect whatever*, he still forms his resolution according to his own judgment, notwithstanding that he acts in accordance with the command of the supreme power. (emphasis my own) (TTP 17/G III 201–202)

So, in cases where we are “impelled” by *any affective motivation* (by “any other affect whatever”), we still maintain some important role in our resultant actions. But, even with this being the case, as Spinoza's following comments indicate, we still must be able to understand people's actions as results of external conditions. Even though we always remain the “master” of our “judgement,” and so always maintain some capacity to be rational, we are still subjected to conditions which direct our actions as a result of our socio-political environments:

still hearts are to some extent under the control of the supreme power, which can bring it about in many ways that most men believe, love, and hate whatever it wants them to. Even if these things don't happen by the direct command of the supreme power, still experience abundantly testifies that they often happen by the authority of its power and by its guidance. (TTP 17/G III 202)

49 LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, 192.

Even though we always maintain some capacity for rationality and freedom, we are still subjected to the “supreme power.” Our socio-political environments can determine, even if indirectly, how our lives proceed. This is the exact kind of situation which Seneca is thrown into, and indeed given the political nature of Seneca’s situation we should not be surprised to find some relevant comments in Spinoza’s more political TTP. Seneca is, as a result of the relevant “supreme power” Nero, put in a situation where suicide is the least available evil, yet he still rationally pursues suicide. Freedom comes in degrees, and Seneca retains a degree of freedom in pursuing the least available evil, but suffers a loss of a degree of freedom insofar as Nero forces suicide to be the least available evil. Since these occur only in degrees, they merely together read off a sort of calculative degree of freedom that Seneca retains, which sits somewhere between 0 (absolutely no freedom) and 1 (absolute freedom); they do not stand as a straight contradiction. Seneca’s suicide is coherently both externally caused and rational, insofar as both impact his calculative degree of freedom.⁵⁰

One might pose another objection here: in Seneca’s situation, it seems that we can easily discern external conditions (Nero) and internally, conatively motivated rationality (opting for the least available evil), but in some situations the line may be blurred between external and internal causes. Consider, an objector may say, a case where one has an awful, terminal, “internal” medical condition, which, when conjoined with an unaccommodating social situation, forces suicide to be appealing. Further, suppose the medical condition intuitively seems to be externally contracted, yet remains internally motivational (insofar as it is a part of oneself that supposedly reduces one’s options for good living). In a case like this, where the distinction between a medical condition’s being external or internal is blurred, and someone opts for suicide, we may think my reading is in trouble. If this medical condition is best considered as external, it cannot also be what internally allows for approaching suicide rationally, since to act rationally is to act based on one’s internal striving to perpetuate one’s actual essence. For Seneca, what forced suicide to be rational was Nero, but what allowed Seneca to approach suicide rationally was his own conative nature. Further, if this medical condition is internal, then it cannot be the sole cause of the suicide, since for the Spinozist suicides must be, at least in significant part, externally caused.⁵¹

I am not convinced that this poses an irreconcilable problem. If the medical condition is best understood as an external condition, then the Spinozist may hold that the suicide is either an irrational suicide (without internal rationality) forced upon them (like the first or third kind of suicide discussed in §1) or, the Spinozist may hold that the person with the medical condition, like Seneca, opts for the lesser evil: they would rather die by suicide than continue to live with a condition that the current environment does not make joy-affirming, based purely on their *conatus* leading them to opt for the least available evil. Indeed, it would represent a failure of the society in which the ill person resides insofar as it does not produce an environment in which living with that condition is viable.

50 Tangentially, while these extracts from the TTP help with my and Nadler’s readings of the Seneca case, they can be illustrative of more from this paper as well. As we have seen in §2, Spinoza explicitly denies the possibility of anyone being absolutely free: no one is born free or acts totally freely, no one is divorced entirely from the influence of external conditions (E4p4/G II 212). What this passage of the TTP shows us is this tenet from the *Ethics* applied politically: in political contexts, even while we maintain a degree of freedom, or “judgement,” while still being influenced by our external socio-political environments.

51 The possibility of this kind of objection was also raised by a reviewer, and I am again indebted to them for prompting me to respond to it.

Further, if the medical condition is best considered to be an internal condition, and a suicide occurs, then the Spinozist may also say that being in an environment where the medical condition was untreatable, or where living comfortably with that condition was made impossible, is the external condition(s) that forced suicide to be appealing. Had the person with the medical condition been in an environment where their condition was treatable or an environment which provided the necessary conditions for them to live sufficiently joyfully, the suicide would not have become rational. The environment here fails to provide the necessary conditions to make living joyfully possible. The person's environment hence becomes the external cause of their suicide.

Finally, if the medical condition is best considered *both* external and internal, then Spinoza may say its *externality* is responsible *to a degree*, and its *internality* is responsible *to a degree*, since we have already made use of such language of degrees with regards to Seneca's death. So, even though the status of the medical condition as internal or external is blurry, there is a functioning Spinozist interpretation of a resulting suicide which makes sense of all cases. As such, a situation like the one mentioned can be described as both externally caused and internally rational, regardless of whether the medical condition is best read as external or internal, or both.

Besides, we need not evaluate the rationality of *all* suicides, which would of course include situations where the internality/externality of a condition which caused suicide is unclear. On the Spinozist framework, it is enough to say that though all suicides are externally caused, *some* may be rational in light of our internal *conatus*, and so Spinoza allows for some rational suicides. Seneca's specific case, being so clear cut, is enough to show that Spinoza coherently allows for some such cases of rational suicide.

5. Conclusion: Spinozist Horizons in Socially Just Suicide Research

In this article, I have tried to show that Spinoza develops a coherent philosophy of suicide on which (1) all suicides are externally caused, yet (2) rational suicides are possible. I have also tried to show how objections to this sort of reading that have been made by Bennett and Grey can be resolved.

If we accept my reading of Spinoza, we can employ it to help with a few issues in contemporary suicide studies. Some have argued that many dominant forms of understanding or studying suicide are too individualistic, and they do not focus enough on how suicidal individuals develop as part of a larger world, which includes social factors, and which acts on them from the outside.⁵² Because this reading of the Spinozist philosophy of suicide that I defend holds by metaphysical necessity that suicides are the result of external conditions, suicide research done perfectly via, or inspired by, such a Spinozist framework would necessarily demand a focus on the external conditions that lead to suicides. Thus, if practiced perfectly, it would necessarily avoid the individualistic pitfalls that some have described.

52 See for e.g., Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 71–72; Vikki Reynolds, "Hate Kills: A Social Justice Response to 'Suicide,'" in Jennifer White et al., eds. *Critical Suicidology: Transforming Suicide Research and Prevention for the 21st Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 170–171; and Jennifer White, "What Can Critical Suicidology Do?," *Death Studies* 41, no. 8 (2017): 474 <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2017.1332901>.

Scholars have also discussed how, in much of dominant suicide research, the testimony and intelligence of suicidal people, at least regarding their suicidality, has not been taken seriously. This is because suicidal people, and suicide itself, has often been understood as irrational and incoherent. Sometimes these prejudices against the mentally ill are considered as forms of epistemic injustice that extend from ableism.⁵³ These ableist forms of epistemic injustice might also lead to suicidal people refusing to talk about their experiences with others: they may fear that they will invariably be labeled by stigmatising terms like “crazy” for having their respective experiences. Such compelled silence is potentially stigmatising and counter-productive to lowering suicide rates.

The reading of Spinoza I advocate here ameliorates this problem. Since my reading of Spinoza holds that suicides can be rational in some cases, depending on the conditions one is thrown into, any research done via, or inspired by, such a Spinozist framework must take seriously the testimony of suicidal people about suicidality; it must treat them as potentially rational agents, and so by necessity not fall prey to the ableist forms of epistemic injustice that much of suicide research, according to some scholars, falls prey to.

What is more, the Spinozist position is not at all defeatist. The fact that suicides can be rational does not mean that we can simply shrug our shoulders and say “so let the suicidal die, if they do so rationally.” While we must respect the epistemic and agentive capacities of suicidal people by noting that some suicides can be rational, we also must recognise that the only situations where suicide is forced to be rational are those which, as we saw, LeBuffe aptly calls “circumstances in which a person’s freedom has been tragically reduced.”⁵⁴ Indeed, Seneca’s suicide only becomes rational because of Nero’s vile tyranny. Further, as Youpa has put it, “insofar as we empower ourselves, we will seek to empower others.”⁵⁵ To make others more powerful, in the end, allows us to join forces with them in mutually power-maximising ways, since as humans our *conatus* pushes us towards some of the same things, and encourages us to work together towards mutually beneficial goals. This is why, for Spinoza, “man is a God to man” (E4p35s/G II 234). So, we must strive to abolish any external conditions which force suicide to be rational, whether for ourselves or for others. These conditions may be inaccessible or otherwise oppressive and exploitative social conditions we strive to abolish, or, like in Seneca’s case, direct political repression which restricts an agent’s powers, or so on. In any case, we must aim to do away with those external conditions which force suicide to be rational.

In these ways, the reading of Spinoza’s philosophy of suicide which I advocate can help rectify lingering issues in suicide research. If we take seriously Spinoza’s arguments about the metaphysical impossibility of self-destruction, and also that some suicides may be rational, we may come upon a framework for studying and approaching suicide which by necessity avoids some of the pitfalls that are present in dominant forms of suicide research. What is more, we may be encouraged to act together to eradicate power-restricting external conditions which force suicides to be rational. Exactly

53 See, for e.g., Alexandre Baril, “‘Fix Society. Please.’ Suicidalité trans et modèles d’interprétation du suicide: repenser le suicide à partir des voix des personnes suicidaires,” *Frontières* 31, no. 2 (July 6, 2020); and Alexandre Baril, “Suicidism: A New Theoretical Framework to Conceptualize Suicide from an Anti-Oppressive Perspective,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (September 10, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070339ar>.

54 LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, 192.

55 Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy*, 178.

what these endeavours would look like, in the end, requires further reflections on Spinozist applications.

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The Desiring Constitutions of Community:

A Two-fold Reading of Spinoza's Social Philosophy in the *Ethics*

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Abstract

This paper argues that we find a double deduction of the origin of society in Spinoza's philosophy. The site of this doubleness is in E4p37, where Spinoza offers two distinct demonstrations for the same phenomenon. Paying close attention to this double articulation highlights important features of Spinozian social and political philosophy. As Étienne Balibar noted, the two demonstrations operate according to two dimensions of human existence, namely *rationality* and *affectivity*. Through rationality, human beings are necessarily in harmony; through affectivity, human beings are in an ambivalent relationship towards one another. The root of this ambivalence, Balibar argued, is the structure of imitation that rules human interactions. Accordingly, the task of politics is to avoid the inimical tendencies of the said ambivalence through artful strategies. In this paper, I aim to sharpen Balibar's reading by proposing a reading of E4p37 that focuses on a little-discussed distinction between *commonality* and *similarity*. This distinction bleeds into social life and becomes the difference between the apolitical community of friends and the political society of citizens. In other words, through a close re-reading of E4p37 that puts it in relation with Spinoza's political works, I argue that rationality cultivates harmony under the guise of friendship, while politics is an art that shapes the category of the similar, thus drawing the contour of the fellow-citizen. Hence, politics seeks to imitate friendship, and it can only do so by shaping our judgement concerning the similarity of the other.

Keywords: Politics, Community, Friendship, Agreement, Similarity, Imitation of affects, Étienne Balibar.

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Introduction: Ambivalent Otherness

Sociability is a riddle. The mystery of our social nature lies in the ambivalence of the other we encounter. Benedict de Spinoza captured this quite accurately in his social philosophy. In one passage of the *Ethics*, he writes:

What we have just shown is also confirmed by daily experience, which provides so much and such clear evidence that this saying is in almost everyone's mouth: man is a God to man. Still, it rarely happens that men live according to the guidance of reason. Instead, their lives are so constituted that they are usually envious and burdensome to one another. They can hardly, however, live a solitary life; hence, that definition which makes man a social animal has been quite pleasing to most. (E4p35s/G II 234, lines 1–9)

Human beings are both godlike and burdensome to one another. Society, Spinoza argues, does not do away with such ambivalence. Instead, it finds an articulation in the midst of it.

Accordingly, we find in the *Ethics* a dual deduction of the genesis of society. As Étienne Balibar notes in the third chapter of his *Spinoza et la politique*, the proposition E4p37 is developed according two different dimensions of human existence. Sociability, Balibar argues, is deduced as a phenomenon rooted equally in rationality and in affectivity. Balibar concludes that (a) sociability necessarily follows from all dimensions of human existence; (b) if the rational deduction shows the necessary harmony constitutive of human social nature, the affective one shows its ambivalent dimension. We are necessarily social; rationally, we harmoniously join each other; affectively, we are equally attracted and repulsed by the other. Political philosophy, accordingly, aims to cultivate the attractive pole of our relation to the other.¹

I propose here a slightly different reading of the proposition articulating this dual genesis. Less than a response to Balibar, I want to sharpen what he disclosed. In the following pages, I add some precision regarding the root of social ambivalence, and argue that the overlooked distinction between *commonality* and *similarity* is the true locus of difference between rational and affective constitutions of sociability. I will begin by delineating Balibar's reading. I will then propose my own reading of the texts, insisting on the importance of commonality and similarity. Finally, I will articulate what this distinction entails for an understanding of Spinoza's social philosophy. Ultimately, I contend that a focus on judgements of similarity can enrich our approach to Spinozian political philosophy.

1. E4p37: Between Reason and Affects

The proposition at hand, E4p37, is the political moment of the *Ethics*, since Spinoza claims to have “shown the foundations of the State” (E4p37s1/G II 236, line 25). It goes as follows: “The good

1 Étienne Balibar, “L'Éthique: une anthropologie politique,” in *Spinoza politique: le transindividuel* (Paris: PUF, 2018).

which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this Desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater” (E4p37). In short, there is a determination of desire according to which virtuous human beings desire in common. Since this proposition articulates the foundations of the State, we can fairly propose that the foundation of political community is a commonality of desire.

What is interesting, however, is that the proposition has two demonstrations—a rare occurrence in the *Ethics*.² Recently, Balibar has proposed a close reading of the two demonstrations, and concluded that while there is one single phenomenon being articulated, it follows from two distinct processes. On the one hand, we have a *rational deduction*; on the other, an *affective*, or *passionate* one.³ The state, then, is a complex phenomenon that is both rational and affective. To understand what this entails is crucial for political philosophy.

Human experience, Spinoza says, is affective. We affect and are affected by the world around us.⁴ Some of those affections are called affects. They express a change.⁵ Some of the affects empower us and thus are joys; others weaken us and thus are sadnesses.⁶ The logic behind this, Spinoza argues, is that every entity strives to persevere in being: that is, it strives to affirm and maintain its existence.⁷ Whatever frustrates such a striving is experienced as an obstacle and something that can potentially destroy us: “[t]hings are of a contrary nature, i.e., cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other” (E3p5/G II 145-6). We call good that which produces joy, and bad what impedes it, that is, we evaluate according to how things help or undermine our striving.⁸ Some encounters, however, are ambivalent: the same object can sometimes be deemed good, and at other times bad.⁹ We navigate the world through the affects, on a sea that is far from being calm.¹⁰

Reason, it should be noted, is affective. Affectivity and rational life are not necessarily opposed: reason partakes in our affective turmoil. Spinoza claims that he seeks “to show what reason prescribes to us, which affects agree with the rules of human reason, and which, on the other hand, are contrary

2 The complete list of the propositions with multiple demonstrations is the following: E1p11, E4p37, E4p51, E4p59. There is another instance of the expression *aliter* in E1p6/G I 48, line 30, but it concerns the demonstration of a corollary, and so does not embrace the same structure as the other instances. It is curious to notice how most instances of multiple demonstrations occur in *De Servitude*.

3 Balibar, “L’Éthique,” 147–48.

4 “The individuals composing the human Body, and consequently, the human Body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways” (E2p13post3/G II 102); “The human Body can move and dispose external bodies in a great many ways” (E2p13post6/G II 103); “The idea of any mode in which the human Body is affected by external bodies must involve the nature of the human Body and at the same time the nature of the external body” (E2p16/G II 103-4).

5 “By *affect* I understand affections of the Body by which the Body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections” (E3def3/G II 139).

6 “By *Joy*, therefore, I shall understand [...] that *passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection*. And by *Sadness*, that *passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection*” (E3p11s/G II 149, lines 1–5).

7 “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in being” (E3p6/G II 146).

8 “The knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of Joy or Sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it” (E4p8/G II 215).

9 “[O]ne and the same man can be affected differently at different times by one and the same object” (E3p51/G II 177).

10 “[I]t is clear that we are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that, like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate” (E3p59s/G II 189, line 5).

to those rules,” thus indicating the non-oppositional relation between reason and affective life (E4p18s/G II 222, lines 12–14).¹¹ Reason, however, can only partake in affective life if it is itself considered affectively. Spinoza, for instance, writes that true knowledge of good and evil does not counter other affects *insofar as it is true*.¹² If, for instance, I know that drinking a whole bottle of whisky in one night would strongly weaken me, it might not counter my desire to do it. If I want to repress my desire, I must make this knowledge affectively stronger. Reason and affects are intertwined in our actual experience. This is key for understanding Balibar’s reading. Reason and affectivity are not necessarily in conflict, and thus they can both articulate the same phenomenon while preserving its unity.¹³

Balibar notices that the rational deduction of sociability articulates a classical argument: insofar as human beings are rational, they necessarily concord with one another. In the words of Balibar: “sociability is a reciprocity of participation in the supreme good defined by reason”.¹⁴ Hence, the rational determination of human desire necessarily leads to society, since it establishes a common good that is desired in common.

Balibar, however, duly notes: “[r]eason alone cannot define human nature: on the contrary, Spinoza constantly insists on this, human nature is defined *at the same time* by reason and by ignorance, imagination and passion.”¹⁵ The affective deduction is not opposed to the first one. It articulates the same phenomenon according to another dimension of human existence: affective mechanisms.¹⁶ Balibar shows that the main mechanism at play is a mimetic tendency called by Spinoza the imitation of affects.¹⁷ Imitation entails that we desire what other people desire, but also that we desire other people to desire like us. It leads to harmony, but also implies a conflictual dimension. As experience shows, evaluative judgements vary. Hence, Balibar concludes, “this image [of the other] is profoundly ambivalent: it is both attractive and repulsive, reassuring and threatening.”¹⁸ Imitation is far from being necessarily harmonious, since it always bears the possibility of conflict.

This prompts the problem at the heart of my inquiry. Balibar argues that affective imitation is the source of ambivalence. I want to go deeper. The other that I imitate is, as Balibar writes, “constituted by a process of imaginary identification.”¹⁹ He does not, however, inquire into the logic of this specific process. My intuition is that the condition of possibility for this process lies in the

11 E4p18s.

12 “No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered an affect” (E4p14/G II 219).

13 While one could object here that affectivity proper is not precise enough since it does not express the difference between actions and passions in Spinoza’s philosophy, it seems that such a distinction is not that important when it comes to analyzing political phenomena. To wit: “For my part I admit that the desires which don’t arise from reason are not so much human actions as passions. But because we’re dealing here with the universal power *or* Right of nature, we can recognize no difference here between the desires generated in us by reason and those generated by other causes” (TP 2.5/G III 277, lines 19–21).

14 Balibar, “L’Éthique,” 144. All translations from Balibar’s text are mine.

15 Balibar, 147.

16 Balibar, 148.

17 Cf. E3p27.

18 Balibar, “L’Éthique,” 151.

19 Balibar, 150.

judgement of similarity. This has consequences regarding how politics can foster cohesive forms of imitation.

That being said, how does this twofold reading interact with Spinoza's explicit references to politics elsewhere in his *oeuvre*? At first sight, the geometrical method of E4p37 does not provide it with a political garb.

The ambivalence of the affective demonstration resonates with what is often called Spinoza's so-called realism, based on his rejection of utopian forms of thinking.²⁰ Curiously, however, the rational demonstration clashes with such realism, and puts into question passages concerning the absence of politics in a community of purely rational beings.²¹

I propose to read E4p37 in relation to E4app12–13:

XII. It is especially useful to men to form associations, to bind themselves by those bonds most apt to make one people of them, and absolutely, to do those things which serve to strengthen friendships;

XIII. But skill [*ars*] and alertness are required for this. For men vary—there being few who live according to the rule of reason—and yet generally they are envious, and more inclined to vengeance than to Compassion. (E4app12–13/G II 269, lines 10–15)

Of interest to me is this *ars*, or *art*, necessitated by the conflictual dimension of our sociability.²² Unsurprisingly, Spinoza writes in the *Political Treatise* that political practitioners are ingenious or crafty: *callidis*.²³ Edwin Curley translates this term by “shrewdness”, which gives it an overtly pejorative connotation. I prefer to side with French translators such as Bernard Pautrat and Charles Ramond who translate the term by “habile,” which preserves an ambiguity regarding political *praxis*.²⁴ The term should be understood in all its ambiguity: politics is a craft, an art, or, as Justin Steinberg puts it, a formative process.²⁵ Spinoza sees social life as necessary, but it keeps being undermined by affective dissonances. To put it as Filippo del Lucchese does, “What Spinoza is describing [in his political thought] [...] is the realistic principle of creating powerful, effective strategies for

20 See, for instance, TP 1.1/G III 273.

21 I will further analyze the following passage in a latter section of the paper: “if human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason points them to, society would surely need no laws” (TTP 5/G III 73, line 29). When referencing the *Theological-Political Treatise*, I prefer the following translation: Benedictus de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

22 Marilena Chaui offers an alternative, but nonetheless interesting account of the relation between passions and political art. See Marilena Chaui, “The Social: A Condition and a Danger to Politics,” *Journal of Spinoza Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 24, <https://doi.org/10.21827/jss.1.1.38482>.

23 In the *Political Treatise*, for instance, he calls political ‘practitioners’ “[ingenious] rather than wise [*potius callidi quam sapientes aestimantur*]” (TP 1.2/G III 273), and “very acute (whether cunning or [ingenious]) [*acutissimis, sive astutis sive callidis*]” (TP 1.3/G 274).

24 Cf. O V 91, and Baruch Spinoza, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Bernard Pautrat, trans. Bernard Pautrat et al., (Paris: Gallimard, 2022), 904.

25 Justin Steinberg, *Spinoza's Political Psychology: The Taming of Fortune and Fear*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), chap. 1. See also Alexandre Matheron's reading of *callidis* and its ambiguity in Alexandre Matheron, “Spinoza et la décomposition de la politique thomiste: machiavélisme et utopie,” in *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l'âge classique* (Lyon: ENS éditions, 2011), 81–111.

resistance: the capacity to respond adequately to the conflict which continually troubles the existence of states.”²⁶ Politics, in this sense, is not reduceable to a striving for harmony. Politics is “strategic”, it is cultivating a “capacity to respond adequately” to the conflictual dimension of interhuman relations. In this sense, I agree with del Lucchese when he claims that “the idea of conceiving of politics as an absence of conflict would be nothing but an illusory fiction.”²⁷ While politics cannot be said to exist in spite of reason (this is the upshot of Balibar’s reading of E4p37), it cannot be said to be necessarily harmonious.

I want to inquire into the way in which the *ars* of E4app13 relates to the affective demonstration of E4p37. The strategic nature of politics, I contend, is grounded in the judgement of similarity constituting the core of the second demonstration. I want to see if it is not possible to distinguish between *community* and *political community* through my focus on the judgement of similarity and how it defines *political art*.

2. First Demonstration: The Coherence of Reason

2.1 Summary of the Rational Demonstration

The first demonstration goes as follows:

Insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason [*Homines, quatenus ex ductu rationis vivunt*], they are most useful to man (by P35C1); hence (by P19), according to the guidance of reason, we necessarily strive to bring it about that men live according to the guidance of reason. Now, the good which everyone who lives according to the dictate of reason (i.e. by P24, who seeks virtue) wants for himself is understanding (by P26). Therefore, the good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men (E4p37d1/G II 235).²⁸

I call this demonstration the *rational demonstration*, because of the phrase “insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason.” This ‘insofar as’ [*quatenus*] indicates the selection of some key features that guide the demonstrative process at play. It is akin to creating ideal conditions while doing experiments in a laboratory. With this ‘insofar as,’ Spinoza states that the first demonstration works according to the logic of rationality *per se*.

Within the two first sentences of the demonstration, Spinoza argues that a virtuous person seeks two things, namely, to understand (“Now, the good which everyone who lives according to the dictate of reason...”) and to live among other rational human beings (“hence, according to the

26 Filippo del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation* (London: Continuum, 2011), 59.

27 Del Lucchese, *Conflict*, 78.

28 I omit here the second half of the demonstration. The reason I do so is because this second half only concerns the second clause of E4p37, namely, that the collective desire is the greater the more we know God. While important, it is not central to my inquiry. By focusing solely on the first part of the proposition *and* the first part of the demonstration, we can center our attention on the social dimension of E4p37.

guidance of reason...”). We see how this creates a circular movement: insofar as we are virtuous, we desire to understand *and* to see others understand. Hence, we share a common desire, one which could be phrased as follows: rational human beings share a desire for rationality, a desire which is satisfied through a common endeavor to foster rationality. This movement is immanent: its circularity does not require anything outside the nature of rationally guided desire.²⁹ To say it somewhat naively: it is the very nature of reason to foster rationality. As I will show in the next section, both of those desiderata are rooted in the same logic, namely, the logic of seeking one’s own advantage.

2.2 Advantage and Coherence

We can arrive at a better understanding of the inner logic of the demonstration by focusing on three moments: (α) the foundation of virtue in the desire of one’s own advantage; (β) virtue as understanding; (γ) agreement as the foundation of advantage.

(α) To start, here is Spinoza’s definition of virtue: “By virtue and power, I understand the same thing, i.e. (by [E3p7]), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, *or* nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone” (E4def8/ G II 209). A key aspect of Spinoza’s understanding of virtue lies in the relation virtue holds with one’s striving to persevere in being: “the foundation of virtue is [the] very striving to preserve one’s own being” (E4p18s/G II 222).³⁰ We necessarily desire what can help us in our endeavor to preserve our being. What helps us in this task is called *advantageous*, or *useful*, both being adequate translations of the Latin *utile*. Hence, if virtue is the striving to preserve one’s being, it is always the desire for one’s own advantage.

In the first demonstration of E4p37, such a desire takes a twofold orientation: it is a “[striving] to bring it about that men live according to the guidance of reason,” but also the desire for understanding as being “the good which everyone who lives according to the dictate of reason [...] wants for himself.” It is still unclear why Spinoza is warranted in making this move.

(β) The question we now face is the following: is there something that is truly and certainly advantageous to human beings? We have the first hint of an answer in E4p18s: “virtue is nothing but acting from the laws of one’s own nature, and no one strives to preserve his being (by [E3p7]) except from the laws of his own nature” (G II 222, lines 24–25). The last clause (“and no one...”) is important here: if virtue is one’s essence, that which help us to attain it depends on our essence. In other words, one’s advantage stems from one’s particular nature.

It is because of this structure of virtue that Spinoza can claim in E4p24/G II 226: “Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being (these three signify the same thing) by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one’s own advantage”. In the demonstration of the proposition, he calls to our attention the fact that “we [human beings] act only insofar as we understand” (E4p24d), and since an action is “when something in us

29 Alexandre Mbomé calls this the “déploiement d’une logique interne” that can do without any recourse to an external moral dictate. See Alexandre Mbomé, “Les fondements métaphysiques de la puissance politique de la multitude,” in *Spinoza et la politique de la multitude*, eds. Sonja Lavaert and Pierre-François Moreau, (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2021), 176.

30 See also E4p22 and its corollary.

or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone” (E3def2/G II 139), we can easily reconstruct the argument. Living rationally, that is, understanding, follows from the laws of human nature, and virtue is everything which follows from such laws, hence: “what we strive for from reason is nothing but understanding; nor does the Mind, insofar as it uses reason, judge anything else useful to itself except what leads to understanding” (E4p26/G II 227). All of this indicates that living rationally is ontologically grounded in human existence, as in, it is the fullest expression of our essence.

From there, we can say the following: living virtuously is living rationally, and what promotes such a life is called advantageous. The argument of the first demonstration of E4p37 is that this very structure is constitutive of collective desire, and thus collective life.

(γ) The final step of the argument lies in the necessarily collective dimension of virtuous desire. The argument relies on a series of propositions (E4p29–37) that develops what is sometimes called the “interhuman dimension” of our desires.³¹ The key principle at play here is the notion of *agreement in nature* [*convenientia*]. We call *advantageous* whatever agrees with our nature: “the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, *or* better, it is for us, and, conversely, the more a thing is useful to us, the more it agrees with our nature” (E4p31c/G II 230). Agreement articulates the ontological foundation of advantage. It explains how a desire can be shared, and thus, held in common.

The logic of agreement is articulated in detail in the propositions 29–37 of part four of the *Ethics*.³² I propose, however, to look at another passage, namely a letter dating from November 1665, sent to Spinoza’s friend, Henry Oldenburg.³³ Letter 32 answers a question from Oldenburg: “you ask me what I think about the question concerning *our knowledge of how each part of Nature agrees* [*conveniat*] *with its whole and how it coheres* [*cohoereat*] *with the others*” (Ep 32, Spinoza to Oldenburg, 20 November 1665 (G IV 169a–170a)). The problem of agreement concerns the unity of individuals not only with the world, but also with each other. It is the latter that is of importance in the present inquiry.³⁴

Spinoza answers as follows: “By the coherence of parts, then, I understand nothing but that the laws *or* the nature of the one part adapts itself to the laws *or* the nature of the other part so that they are opposed to each other as little as possible” (Ep 32, Spinoza to Oldenburg, 20 November 1665 (G IV 170a, lines 14–15)). Coherence of parts means that the natures of each part are “opposed to each other as little as possible.” Coherence means a non-oppositional position that results from the mutual adaptation of different individuals. If coherence is advantageous, it is because it avoids conflicts which could be detrimental to one entity. Coherence is a condition for one’s advantage. One’s advantage is determined according to the degree of coherence it shares with external objects.

31 Alexandre Matheron, “Les fondements d’une éthique de la similitude (Éthique IV, propositions 29 à 31 et corollaire),” in *Études sur Spinoza*, 665–680; Pierre-François Moreau, “Imitation of the Affects and Interhuman Relations,” in *Spinoza’s Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, eds. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz, and Robert Schnepf (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

32 For a detailed analysis of this demonstrative movement, see Matheron, “Fondements d’une éthique de la similitude.”

33 I am indebted here to Andrea Sangiacomo who points out this letter as an important text when it comes to unfolding the notion of agreement in Spinoza’s philosophy. See Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 118.

34 Note that in the following, I take *conveniat* and *cohoereat* to be synonymous, an intuition warranted by the letter, but also supported by Andrea Sangiacomo’s reading of the letter. See Sangiacomo, 121.

I read E4p37 as articulating the coherence of rational individuals at the level of their desires. It is this coherence, or agreement, that explains how virtuous desire, as a desire following from the laws of human nature, is ontologically collective. Rational individuals cohere with one another: they desire the same thing, in the same way, and they are thus naturally ‘adapted’ to each other’s nature. They require no adaptation to each other, because they necessarily follow the laws of human nature. They desire in common, and this is the foundation of community.

But E4p37 goes further: not only do rational individuals agree with one another because they share a common desire, but they also desire each other’s presence. The rationale behind this is expressed in the appendix to the fourth part of the *Ethics*:

It is impossible for man not to be a part of nature and not to follow the common order of nature. But if he lives among such individuals as agree with his nature, his power of acting will thereby be aided and encouraged. *On the other hand, if he is among such as do not agree at all with his nature, he will hardly be able to accommodate himself to them without greatly changing himself* (E4app7/G II 268, italics mine).

Coherence is advantageous because it removes opposition between individuals, thus helping them to persevere in being. This passage stresses how a strong enough disagreement requires an individual to “greatly change” to adapt themselves to their world. Disagreement, at the ontological level, is contrary to virtue since it undermines the foundation of virtue, viz. perseverance in being. When human beings live rationally, they follow the laws of human nature, and can be said to share a common nature. One would be at pains to find a more optimal form of coherence. Hence, desiring to bring it about that other human beings also live rationally is a desire for the strongest form of coherence. It is implied in virtuous desire, which is a desire for one’s advantage. The logic of seeking one’s own advantage implies that we desire understanding and to share such understanding.

To conclude the present subsection, I can thus summarize my reading of the first demonstration programmatically:

(α) To be virtuous is to seek one’s own advantage, because to be virtuous is to foster our own perseverance in being;

(β) One’s own advantage is dependent on one’s nature; in the case of human beings, this means understanding (per E4p24 and E4p26);

(γ) Advantage is founded in agreement, whereby different individuals can be said to cohere together, that is, a state where oppositions are diminished. Agreement requires adaptation to one another, and so, if individuals follow the dictates of reason, they are naturally adapted to one another, since they all act following the laws of human nature.

Ergo, the first demonstration shows how the very structure of human virtue is immanently collective: one’s virtue is understanding, and it is fostered by the presence of other individuals sharing the same desire.

2.3 Consequences and Echoes

The first demonstration shows us how a society of virtuous persons is constituted. Community arises out of the nature of reason itself through the foundation of virtue in the desire for one’s advantage. Community, in other words, is immanent to the virtuous orientation of desire.

We can, however, raise some concerns. Is Spinoza implying that all communities are necessarily virtuous? If so, how does it work with his disavowal of utopian political philosophies (cf. TP 1.1/G III 273)?

In many passages of his political works, Spinoza insists on the fact that politics is necessary *because* human beings are *not* solely guided by reason. Take the following passage from the *TTP*: “[n]ow, if human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason [*vera ratio*] points them to, society would surely need no laws; men would only need to learn true moral doctrine [*vera documenta moralia*], in order to do what is truly useful [*vere utile*] of their own accord with upright and free mind. But they are not so constituted, far from it” (*TTP* 5/G III 73, lines 29–31). If human existence were solely rational, there would be no need for any laws. Experience, however, tells us that such a condition is not the human one.

Dimitris Vardoulakis proposes the following reading:

[i]f society included members who all calculated their utility according to the operation of reason, without being overwhelmed by emotions such as fear, then there would be no need for statutory law. The entire social function would then consist in the coordination between reason and utility, and no authority would be required to instruct humans what is the right conduct, nor written laws to institute a command and obedience model.³⁵

The prescription of *true reason* does not require an external form of authority to be followed. From the desire for one’s advantage, one is led to find a *true moral doctrine*, which is nothing but the striving to obtain that which is *truly useful*. Thus, as Vardoulakis rightly shows, *authority*, understood here as an external power that imposes some commands, is not required in a society of purely rational individuals. The problem is that, for Spinoza, a true knowledge, insofar as it is true, is not sufficient to counter affects.³⁶ Spinoza insists three times on the truthful character of a purely rational life: true reason, true moral doctrine, and true advantage, all of which are, in experience, insufficient to counter the real tendencies of our all too human condition.

This passage allows Vardoulakis to show that utility is *logically* and *ontologically* prior to authority within Spinoza’s political thought. I find his insight helpful for the present inquiry because, by showing that utility is prior to authority, it becomes possible to stress the difference between *society* and *the state* within Spinoza’s philosophy.

In E4p37s1, Spinoza establishes the difference between life under the guidance of reason and the state. After defining the features of a life under the guidance of reason, he writes: “[i]n addition to this, I have also shown what the foundations of the state [*civitatis*] are” (E4p37s1/G II 236, line 26, italics mine). I take the ‘in addition to this’ to indicate that what is said about a rational existence is distinct from the foundations of the state. Let us consider the structure of communal rational existence to understand such a distinction.

Spinoza gives three features of a rational life: i) what we desire and do following the knowledge of God (*religion*), ii) the desire to do good arising from life under the guidance of reason (*piety*), iii) the desire of one living under the guidance of reason to befriend other human beings (*being*

35 Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Spinoza, the Epicurean* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 150.

36 Cf. E4p14.

honourable). I immediately notice that there is no mention of authority or polity: through religion and piety, a rational life teaches a true moral doctrine. The social dimension of such a life is called friendship [*amicitia*] (E4p37s1/G II 236, lines 20–25). Friends, in this sense, are human beings perfectly cohering in virtue of their desire.

We find here a foreshadowing of the passages I already cited from the appendix to *De Servitude*: E4app12/G II 269 states that “to do those things which serve to strengthen friendships” is “especially useful,” and E4app13/G II 269–270 explains that this enterprise is complicated, “[f]or men vary—there being few who live according to the rule of reason,” and so requires “skill and alertness.” There is thus a tension between what we do following reason alone and human condition in actual experience. Following reason, we pursue bonds of friendship, and we “show best how much our skill and understanding are worth by educating men so that at last they live according to the command of their own reason” (E4app9/G II 269). In other words, under the guidance of reason, we entertain friendship by seeking to share our desire for understanding—without the necessity to coerce the other.

This leads me to the following conclusion: E4p37d articulates the apolitical dimension of our social lives. In this sense, authors who insist on the fact that Spinozian politics are *not* rooted in reason are right.³⁷ They are right insofar as from the dictates of reason alone, we cannot derive a structure of authority: we can only deduce a *true moral doctrine*, which delineates what I would call an *ethics of friendship*. Nevertheless, because human beings do not solely live under the guidance of reason, reason must use a strategy, to use Laurent Bove’s expression.³⁸ This will become clearer in the next section.

I propose to call the community following from the nature of reason a *community of friendship*, one characterized by a common love for understanding. There exists a rational society which is a community of *friends*.³⁹ Such a community is *apolitical*: it expresses the optimal form collective desire can take; it is immanent to the nature of rational life. E4p37d is *the demonstration of friendship*.

37 Aurelia Armstrong, “Natural and Unnatural Communities: Spinoza Beyond Hobbes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 279–305; Laurent Bove, *La stratégie du conatus: Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1996); Eugene Garver, “Spinoza’s Democratic Imagination,” *The European Legacy* 19, no. 7 (2014): 833–853; Sophie Laveran, “Le problème de la composition politique chez Spinoza : hypothèses ontologiques et perspectives pratiques,” *Philonsorbonne*, no. 6 (2012): 41–63, <https://doi.org/10.4000/philonsorbonne.387>; Matheron, “Fondements d’une éthique de la similitude.”

38 As per the title of Bove’s book: *La stratégie du conatus*.

39 One can find a related argument in Mogens Lærke’s most recent book. In the chapter dedicated to the different forms of authority one can find in the *TTP*, Lærke shows that Spinoza sees a form of authority in friendship, even though this authority might be better defined as private rather than public. The foundation of this private authority is found in human nature, and it thus lies beyond what Vardoulakis and I consider to be authority. Lærke ultimately argues that “[f]ree philosophizing is governed by a form of authority—the authority to teach and advise—that Spinoza considers an inalienable natural right entirely beyond the grasp of civil law”. Mogens Lærke, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 85.

3. Alternative Demonstration: The Image of the Other

3.1 Summary of the Argument

As Balibar claims, the second demonstration concerns affective mechanisms. Indeed, it goes as follows:

The good which man wants for himself and loves, he will love more constantly if he sees that others love it (by [E3p31]). So (by [E3p31cor]), he will strive to have the others love the same thing. And because this good is common to all (by P36), and all can enjoy it, he will therefore (by the same reason) strive that all may enjoy it. And this striving will be the greater, the more he enjoys this good (by [E3p37]), q.e.d. (E4p37alt/G II 235–236).

It articulates a form of *collective love* which is accompanied by a *collective enjoyment*. Hence, it is the affective genesis of the collective constitution of desire.

I suggest that we keep in mind the tension that appeared in the last few pages. We require politics, and so authority, because we are under the yoke of the affects. Still, Spinoza does contend that he can show how affects work with reason, and not against it.⁴⁰ The issue, as I will show, is that whereas reason necessarily leads to a community of friends, affective social life is inherently ambivalent and ambiguous. Some features of society that do not arise under the sole guidance of reason come from this ambivalence.

3.2 Imitation and the Politics of Enjoyment

The path of affectivity seems much simpler than the rational one. It is founded in the imitation of the affects. Here is Spinoza's explanation of the phenomenon: "If we imagine a thing like us [*rem nobis similem*], toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect" (E3p27/G II 160). On the surface, this proposition is as simple as it gets: when we see another thing [*rem*] we *imagine* to be similar to us, we spontaneously tend to imitate its affects because of the similarity it bears with us. I say 'spontaneously,' because the proposition mentions the fact that this *rem nobis similem* is a thing toward which we have had no affect. At this level, it seems that the affective constitution of collective desire is a spontaneous process: community arises because a dimension of our affective life is inherently mimetic, thus, inherently social. Just as rationally guided desire was necessarily social it seems that imitation makes affective life *necessarily* interpersonal.

The concept of imitation has recently been identified as playing an essential role in the formation of society. Alexandre Matheron and Justin Steinberg, for instance, place the process of imitation as the central dynamic of our social lives. Because we tend to imitate the affects of others like us, we

⁴⁰ Cf. E4p18s/G II 222, lines 12–14.

interact with other beings with a desire for esteem and an aversion for shame.⁴¹ Indeed, if any of our actions cause another person to be disgusted, we will imitate such an affect and feel disgusted by our own actions, which will sadden us. We thus strive to have other people esteem us, since we will imitate such an esteem and feel happy about ourselves. As Spinoza writes: “[w]e shall strive to do also whatever we imagine men to look on with Joy, and on the other hand, we shall be averse to doing what we imagine men are averse to” (E3p29/G II 162). Imitation acts as a cohesive factor: it creates a sense of collective values that shapes interpersonal relations. We see in the alternative demonstration that we want others to love and enjoy what we love and enjoy because it bolsters our own feelings of love and joy. A community is born through the creation of collective appreciation.

Affects can be said to work in accordance with the dictates of reason when we delve into the affective structure of virtue. We saw that virtue consists in preserving our being and that anything aiding such a task is judged to be useful. From an affective standpoint, an individual will strive to imagine that which brings them joy, if the latter is understood as “a man’s passage from a lesser to a greater perfection” (E3def.aff.2/G II 191). If a virtuous individual seeks to preserve their being, then anything bringing them to a greater power will not only be advantageous (from the standpoint of reason), but will also be an object of love, where love is understood as “a Joy, accompanied by the idea of an external cause” (E3def.aff.6/G II 192-193). Affectively then, virtuous human beings will pursue through love what brings them the utmost joy.⁴² The affective dimension of one’s own advantage is one’s enjoyment.

This is where the imitation of affects plays a determinant role: imitation can shift our desire, and any other affects, from an object *per se* to a relation to the object. Instead of desiring understanding as such, the process of imitation makes it so that we desire the desire of others we consider to be like us.⁴³ Just as the coherence of desire creates an optimal environment for the individual living under the guidance of reason, imitation creates an affective cohesion in the enjoyment of the other’s joy. To put it more simply, the more I see other beings enjoying the same thing as I do, the more my own joy will be reinforced. Hence, from an affective standpoint, the virtuous person enjoys the other’s enjoyment to further their own joy. The mimetic dimension of our affective life entails that maximal joy has to be social.

I propose to call this dynamic a *politics of enjoyment*. Imitation, in its positive dimension, makes it possible to produce joyful affects which are intrinsically interpersonal.⁴⁴ The enjoyment of the object becomes secondary to the enjoyment of the communal desire for it. The genesis of society, when affectively virtuous, happens through the enjoyment of imitation—through the constitution of common joyful affects rooted in an eternally and universally enjoyable good, viz. understanding.

41 Alexandre Matheron, “L’indignation et le *conatus* de l’État spinoziste,” in *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l’âge classique*, (Lyon: ENS éditions, 2011), 219–220; Steinberg, *Spinoza’s Political Psychology*, 29.

42 Cf. E3p28.

43 Armstrong, “Natural and Unnatural Communities,” 287.

44 Pierre-François Moreau proposes the distinction between two kinds of passions: “One might say that human life finally organizes itself around two types of passions: those based on the connection between objects and those based on similarity, which facilitates the imitation of affects,” in Moreau, “Imitation,” 168. Another way to phrase this would be to say that for Spinoza, there are passions rooted in a direct relation with object and others that are rooted in the other. So not only do we desire certain objects, but we also desire the desire of others.

3.3 Ambiguities and Consequences

There remains, however, *le non-dit* of the second demonstration: the antagonistic dimension of imitation. Imitation can also be a source of disharmony. This appears in E4p37s1: “[h]e who strives, only because of an affect, that others should love what he loves, and live according to his temperament, acts only from impulse and is hateful” (G II 236, lines 8–10). The warning reappears, albeit in a different form, in the appendix to *De Servitude*:

[f]or men vary—there being few who live according to the rule of reason—and yet generally they are envious, and more inclined to vengeance than to Compassion. *So it requires a singular power of mind to bear with each one according to his understanding, and to restrain oneself from imitating their affects* (E4app13/G II 269, italics mine).

Not only must the virtuous person avoid living only according to impulse, but they must also “restrain themselves from imitating the affects” of impulsive individuals. Whereas the rational demonstration unambiguously leads to friendship, the affective constitution of community can easily turn into a rule of impulses, where envy and jealousy threaten to undo the community.

Because imitation can potentially break out into a regime of impulsions, the process of imitation must be guided in the direction of collective enjoyment: that is, it must strive to approach the dynamic of friendship. Hence, the requirement of creating institutions that will orient the process of imitation towards virtuous imitation: “Society has the power to prescribe a common rule of life, to make laws, and to maintain them—not by reason [...] but by threats. This Society [*Societas*] [...] is called a State [*Civitatis*], and those who are defended by its laws, Citizens [*Cives*]” (E4p37s2/G II 236, lines 10–17, italics mine). The affectively constituted society [*societas*] is a community of citizens [*cives*], who are produced through the prescription of a common rule of life. If rationally guided individuals are inherently *friends* because they necessarily follow the same prescriptions (the rational ‘religion’ of E4p37s1), the affective bond uniting individuals under a common prescription oftentimes requires (“For men vary...”) an artificial construct, namely, the creation of the citizen. The task of politics—or the art [*ars*] of politics, to use the language of E4app13—is to create common rules which foster a virtuous form of imitation. Citizens are created through coercion into a simulacrum of friendship. This is what Balibar identified as the attractive pole of the ambivalence of the image of the other.

So our problem seems to already be solved: in order to counter the ambivalence of imitation, it suffices to develop institutions that will aim to avoid the bad tendencies of affective life. Take, for instance, this passage from the *Political Treatise*:

Both in the natural state and in the civil order, man acts according to the laws of his own nature [*ex legibus suae naturae*] and looks out for his own advantage. In each situation, I say, man, is guided by hope or fear, either to do or not to do, this or that action. *The principal difference between the two conditions is that in the civil order everyone fears the same things: for everyone there is one and the same cause of security and principle of living* (TP 3.3/G III 285, lines 23–26, italics mine).

The political community differs from the natural order of things by the constitution of a common object of fear which calls for a common rule to provide security. This is *not* against the order of

nature: “Right of nature does not cease in the civil order,” simply because the rule of looking out for one’s own advantage is still maintained (TP 3.3/G III 285, line 22). Now, however, one’s advantage is construed as common by the production of a common affect. Political institutions are ultimately only makeshift for a proper rational constitution: they imitate the effects of the rational constitution of collective desire.⁴⁵

There remains, however, a crucial notion to unpack: *similarity*. Sophie Laveran has insisted on the fact that similarity is always potentially inadequate.⁴⁶ She is right insofar as similarity is the result of an imagining: I imagine the other as similar, and what can fall under this process is not determined in advance. Similarity is undetermined in the sense that we do not know what makes certain beings similar to us.⁴⁷ In E3p27, Spinoza does not mention that we necessarily imitate human beings: he uses the phrase *rem nobis similem*, implying that what we judge to be similar is first and foremost a *thing* [*rem*], and not a person. The problem of similarity is crucial. If the other is potentially any thing [*res*], then the problem of similarity concerns what can be considered worthy of imitation. It concerns, in other words, the political determination of the other as a citizen.

There is a widespread assumption that *similarity* and *coherence* (agreement) are the same phenomenon.⁴⁸ For instance, Alexandre Matheron, in his essay concerning what he calls the “ethics of similitude,”⁴⁹ is solely concerned with the logic of agreement presented in *De Servitute* (viz. proposition E4p29-31). Without a proper justification, Matheron and other scholars making the same assumption leave in the dark the notion of similarity. While they grasp the ambivalence of imitation, they miss its ambiguity. It leaves in the dark an important aspect of the political shaping of imitation.

To understand how similarity differs from agreement in nature, consider the possibility of imitating animal affects. Warren Montag accurately points out that the barrier between what is similar and what is not is porous and can fluctuate.⁵⁰ Montag calls to our attention a passage in E4p68s, where Spinoza recounts the Adamic narrative of the Fall:

45 Compare my conclusion with this passage: “For the Right of a Commonwealth is determined by the power of a multitude which is led as if by one mind. But there is no way this union of minds can be conceived unless the Commonwealth aims most at what sound reason teaches to be useful to all men” (TP 3.7/G III 287).

46 Laveran, “Le problème”, 54.

47 Douglas J. Den Uyl also notices this problem: “Spinoza’s nominalism permits the possibility that the *imitation of affects* principle will not occur at times because, for some reason (e.g. race, dress, or language), the other is not perceived as similar to oneself”. Douglas J. Den Uyl, “Sociality and Social Contract: A Spinozistic Perspective,” in *Spinoza’s Philosophy of Society*, eds. Emilia Giancotti Boscherini, Alexandre Matheron, and Manfred Walther, *Studia Spinozana* 1 (Alling: Walther & Walther, 1985), 47n28.

48 There are, however, a few exceptions. See Michael Della Rocca, “Egoism and the Imitation of Affects in Spinoza,” in *Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man: Ethica Papers Presented at the Fourth Jerusalem Conference*, eds. Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal, *Spinoza by 2000* (New York: Little Room Press, 2004). Similarly, Moreau puts into question our spontaneous association of ‘similarity’ with ‘human beings’ cf. Moreau, “Imitation.” None of them, however, go further than raising some doubts. The most developed account of the difference between similarity and agreement is in Laveran, “Le problème de la composition politique chez Spinoza.” According to her, *De Servitute* is an attempt to replace a logic of similarity with a logic of utility and agreement. She reads similarity as an ‘as if...’, which differs from my own reading.

49 Matheron, “Fondements d’une éthique de la similitude.”

50 Warren Montag, “Imitating the Affects of Beasts: Interest and Inhumanity in Spinoza,” *Differences* 20, no. 2–3 (2009): 69, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2009-004>.

And so we are told that God prohibited a free man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that as soon as he ate of it, he immediately feared death, rather than desiring to live; and then, that, the man having found a wife who agreed completely with his nature, he knew that there could be in nothing in nature more useful to him than she was; but that after he believed the lower animals to be like himself, he immediately began to imitate their affects (see [E3p27]) and to lose his freedom[.] (G II 261–262, lines 29–5).

Imitation is not limited to other human beings. The first man knew that his wife completely agreed with him in nature, thus being the most useful thing there could be. In other words, the first man rationally understood the advantage of forming a society with another human being. Still, he came to form the belief that beasts were similar to him, and thus imitated their affects. This imitation is the cause of Adam's loss of freedom, which he only recovers, Spinoza says, when he starts to "desire for other men the good he desires for himself", in other words, freedom is only recovered when Adam actualizes E4p37. Imitation, as undetermined, can be a cause of unity,⁵¹ or a cause of servitude.⁵²

Montag argues that this possibility of animal imitation blurs the apparent objectivity of the category of similarity. I take him to mean that when we first encounter E3p27, we tend to associate *rem nobis similem* to other human beings. This is indeed warranted by the demonstration of E3p27 which deduces imitation from the structure of the body. Because images are ideas that involve both the nature of one's body and of an external thing,⁵³ if the structure of the external body is like our own, then when we imagine an affection of this external body, we imagine a similar affection of our body. Such an argument has led a scholar like Daniela Bostrenghi to conclude that imitation has a biological foundation.⁵⁴ She posits that the social dimension of our affective life is something rooted in the very structure of our bodies: we experience, viscerally, the other as similar to us.⁵⁵ This reading does not allow us, however, to understand how the imitation of animals is possible. If the structure of the body explains imitation, then the narrative of E4p68s would be incomprehensible. Indeed, Adam's human body could not be said to resemble the body of animals, and so imitation could not ensue, even more when it is said that Adam *knew* that Eve completely agreed with his nature.

I want to propose here a different reading of the nature of similarity. The text of E3p27d says the following: "if the nature of the external body is like the nature of our body" (G II 160, line 14). The likeness of the other's body is based on the image I have of my own body. Through a judgement of similarity, I see *myself* in the *other*. The ground of similarity is the image I have of my own body. The nature of such an image is affective: through experiences of joy and sadness, I come to understand the way in which my body interacts with the world. When I put my hand above a flame, the pain of the interaction traces the image I have of myself. A human being who would put their hand in the

51 Cf. E4p37alt.

52 Cf. E4p68s.

53 Cf. E2p16.

54 Daniela Bostrenghi, "*Tantum juris quantum potentiae* : Puissance de la raison et puissance des affects chez Spinoza," in *Spinoza Transalpin : les interprétations actuelles en Italie*, eds. Chantal Jaquet and Pierre-François Moreau (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2014) 117–138, <http://books.openedition.org/psorbonne/263>.

55 Bostrenghi, para. 10.

fire without any pain would appear highly dissimilar: their tolerance to pain would appear to be inhuman. This leads me to suggest that similarity is not rooted in the body, but in affectivity: to see myself in the other, they have to express affects that are similar to mine.⁵⁶

Take another example, this time, drawn from the *Ethics* “For one who is moved to aid others neither by reason nor by pity is rightly called *inhuman*. For (by [E3p27]) he seems to be *unlike* a man” (E4p50s/G II 247, line 26). One reason why we are moved to pity is because when we see a being similar to us being affected with sadness, we also feel sad, and since we strive to avoid sadness, we strive to relieve them of it. We expect human beings to be moved by pity at the sight of human sadness, because imitation makes it so that we seek the joy of others to imitate such a joy. Failing to pity another human being entails failing to imitate the other; such a failure expresses a lack of similarity. Without similarity, my relation to another human being is akin to a relation to a mere object, without any interpersonal dimension. Aristotle writes in his *Politics*: “he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need for it because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.”⁵⁷ Spinoza’s theory of affective mimesis implies the same thing. The being unable to imitate is incapable of being social: it is unlike a human being. It is a being that is unable to make proper judgements of similarity.

When it comes to the structure of society, imitation is required to uphold common values. Similarity, in other words, has to be produced. A being that would transgress every single law and taboo would be seen as inhuman and deviant.⁵⁸ Through institutions, the state creates similarity amongst the citizens. If the golden rule says to love one’s neighbor as oneself, I see politics as that which determines the content of the notion of ‘neighbor’. Not everyone can count as a neighbor, and politics draws distinctions between those who are neighbors, and those who are not.⁵⁹

Politics draws the contours, or the image, of the friend. Affectively, society [*societas*] offers optimal enjoyment through common love and joy. Because similarity is ambiguous, political practitioners (as per the language of the *TP*) must be cunning and ingenious in order to orient the process of imitation: they have to artificially produce bonds of friendship. They do so by transforming society [*societas*] into a state [*civitatis*]. They must paint a figure, the figure of the friend through the determination of what falls within the category of the similar: they create the citizen [*cives*] by shaping judgements of similarity. E4p37alt insinuates that the art of politics is the art of creating the figure of the friend: it is the crafty [*callidis*] imitation of reason.

56 Such a similarity of affects seems to be at play in Bove’s interpretation of the imitation of affects. As he mentions in a footnote: “L’imagination est ainsi toujours imagination « humaine », que j’imagine la joie d’un animal ou celle d’un autre homme,” in Bove, *La stratégie du conatus*, 79n2. Bove refers to E4p68s to show how Adam was able to imitate the beasts and did so in a human way; the problem was that such an imitation was necessarily inadequate to its object, since the animal is incapable of truly human affects. Thus, Bove’s interpretation suggests that imitation can only be human—something which could work with the conclusions of E4p37alt.

57 Aristotle, *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1253a27–29.

58 Take for instance the work of someone like Georges Bataille who shows that there is a mingling of divinity and animality in the very movement of transgression, leading some individuals to be completely sovereign. Cf. Georges Bataille, *La part maudite*, Reprise 22 (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1949); Georges Bataille, *L’érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957).

59 Related to this, Laurent Bove will say that the unity of a nation, or a sense of nationalism, depends on the mimetic dimension of our affective life. See Bove, *La stratégie du conatus*, 200–201.

4. Conclusion: Friends and Citizens

The present paper stemmed from a single proposition, the one articulating the necessarily collective dimension of our desire. Ultimately, I showed that friendship and politics are both necessary because of our nature. Both express the collective constitution of our desire. They do so, however, differently. Friendship necessarily follows from a common pursuit: life under the guidance of reason, or virtue. Rationally guided desire leads to an *ethics of friendship*. Politics forms citizens: it traces the figure of the friend through the institutions of shared values that shape our conception of similarity. It does so to promote forms of imitation, because through imitation human beings are able to enter into loops of mutual enjoyment. Affectively, communities are ruled by a *politics of enjoyment*.

In a letter to Jarig Jelles, Spinoza cites Thales of Miletus: “All things, he said, are common among friends” (Ep. 44, Spinoza to Jelles, 17 February 1671, G IV 228). The community of friends is natural, it follows from their common love for understanding. Friends form a community in which they desire everything in a non-conflictual way. They adapt their own desires to each other’s. Affectively, friendship conduces to joy, to a constant reminder that we rejoice in the joy of the other.

Unfortunately, the story of imitation is not a steady river. Politics works differently: it must create institutions, norms, values, and those who transgress those norms and laws, that is, those who are not affected by those values in the common way, are considered dissimilar, deviant. This can only be done by shaping what ‘similarity’ means. The politically inclined individual is cunning, ingenious: he finds a way to foster imitations of friendship, or should we say friendly imitations. “For men vary...” We are carried over by our passions, we fluctuate to the rhythm of our affective conflicts.

Philosophy, as the desire for rationality, fosters a community of friends. Politics is not philosophy, but it could be said to imitate it through an ingenious art, thus affectively creating the citizen, by painting the category of similarity.

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Wolfgang Bartuschat: An Obituary

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Abstract

This is an obituary on Wolfgang Bartuschat (May 13, 1938 – August 10, 2022), an eminent Spinoza scholar at Universität Hamburg. As an interpreter, Bartuschat emphasized the human and individual perspective in Spinoza's metaphysical and political thought. Bartuschat will also be remembered as an excellent translator and editor.

Keywords: Wolfgang Bartuschat, Obituary, Spinoza, German Translation, German Edition

Professor Wolfgang Bartuschat died on August 10, 2022 at the age of 84. From 1977 until his retirement in 2002, he was a professor of philosophy at Universität Hamburg, where he worked on the history of philosophy from Descartes to Hegel, with a particular focus on Spinoza and Kant.

Wolfgang Bartuschat was born on May 13, 1938 in Königsberg. His family later fled to Saxony and eventually to Düsseldorf, where Bartuschat earned his high-school diploma (*Abitur*) in 1958. In the same year, he enrolled at Universität Hamburg to study philosophy, German literature, and sociology, and attended classes taught by, among others, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker and Hans Blumenberg. But the 20-year-old Bartuschat was so intrigued by Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics that after only one year in Hamburg, he moved to Heidelberg to study with Gadamer himself. After Heidelberg, an interest in studying theater arts took Bartuschat to Vienna; a short time later, Bartuschat went to Bonn to study with the famous literary historian Richard Alewyn, who wanted Bartuschat to go on to a career in German literature. Preferring a career in philosophy, Bartuschat moved to Freie Universität in Berlin, where Dieter Henrich was teaching at the time, and then moved back to Heidelberg to work with Gadamer on a doctoral thesis on Nietzsche's philosophy of will. After defending his thesis in 1964, Bartuschat taught at Heidelberg until moving to Hamburg in 1970 to become Reiner Wiehl's research assistant. Bartuschat submitted his habilitation (a second major project, beyond the dissertation, that makes one eligible for a professorship) on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1971 and was promoted to his professorship at Universität Hamburg in 1977.

After his habilitation, Bartuschat increasingly devoted himself to studying Spinoza, thereby embarking on an intellectual journey that lasted until the end of his life. He had an enormous and

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lasting impact on German Spinoza research in two roles: first, as a brilliant commentator and interpreter of Spinoza's thought, and second, as a careful editor and translator of Spinoza's philosophical writings.

In his role as a commentator, Bartuschat persistently argued that Spinoza's rationalist metaphysics shouldn't be understood as a mere theory of the absolute, but as a theory of the absolute complemented by a distinctively human perspective, a metaphysics deliberately complemented by a theory of human well-being. Bartuschat developed this interpretation in numerous articles (many of which are compiled in his *Spinozas Philosophie: über den Zusammenhang von Metaphysik und Ethik*, 2017) as well as in his monograph *Spinozas Theorie des Menschen* (1992). He was also the author of what remains one of the best introductions to Spinoza in German (Beck 1996; 2nd ed. 2006).

Bartuschat's interpretation opposes the widespread reading of Spinoza as someone who tried to deduce his ethical claims from his metaphysical views about substance or the absolute. In fact, Bartuschat agrees with Hegel's famous criticism that Spinoza fails to deduce any substantive characteristics of particulars from his abstract theory of substance or the absolute, let alone any characteristics that could be used to develop any informative ethics. Unlike Hegel, however, Bartuschat does not blame Spinoza for the inability to deductively determine the individual from the absolute, since on his reading, Spinoza never intended such a deduction in the first place. According to Bartuschat, Spinoza's metaphysics (i.e., his theory of the absolute) and his ethics (i.e., his theory of human beings and the possibility of a good life) instead mutually determine each other such that one cannot be had without the other. On the one hand, a theory of the absolute requires a theory of human beings, since it is only against this backdrop that we can appreciate how we tend to conceive of the absolute and thus learn about the pitfalls we should be aware of when we seek to come up with an adequate conception of the absolute. On the other hand, a realistic theory of a good human life requires a robust theory of the absolute: understanding the absolute is a prerequisite for gaining a precise and accurate understanding of our finite condition, which we need in order to correctly assess our options about leading a good life.

In his later years, Bartuschat became increasingly intrigued by Spinoza's political philosophy and was particularly interested in the relationship between the fundamental ontological framework and more particular claims about human beings, community, law, and the state. Like many other commentators over the last 40 years, Bartuschat insisted on the specific form of argumentation of the two political treatises, as well as on the basic premise that the realm of politics and society will always be marked by irrationality and unreason. Bartuschat underscored that Spinoza's politics responds to this condition in a non-cynical and non-strategic way: it searches for a rational way to deal with irrational citizens. For Bartuschat, the importance of this lies less in the intersubjective or transindividual factors highlighted by many French and Italian colleagues. For Bartuschat, Spinoza is a thinker of the individual subject and their freedom. Thus, as a metaphysician and epistemologist, Bartuschat's Spinoza seeks to vindicate, rather than overcome, human individuality; Spinoza's political writings show how the state may both defend and threaten human individuality. So understood, Spinoza is more a forerunner of Kant than of Marx or Nietzsche; the possibility of an alternative, radical form of liberalism to be constructed with Spinozist means might be the lasting promise of this reading.

In his role as an editor and translator, Bartuschat has been continuously active since 1978: first as an editor of Arthur Buchenau's early 20th-century German translations of Spinoza's works, and then, since the mid-1990s, as a re-translator and editor of all of Spinoza's Latin and Dutch works and letters. As a result of Bartuschat's work, researchers and teachers working in German can rely on an edition of Spinoza's works that is not only modern and accurate, but also highly philosophically informed. Up until recently, the German edition of Spinoza's collected writings that amended Carl Gebhardt's groundbreaking editorial work from the 1920s was the global academic benchmark in terms of textual research and documentation. While this benchmark is now the new Paris edition, for German readers, Spinoza still speaks in a voice and tone found and invented by Bartuschat.

Bartuschat also shaped the history of philosophy as an editor of the *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, a position he took alongside Dorothea Frede, a colleague at Hamburg, in 1992. From 1992 to 2010, he helped make the *Archiv* one of the most respected journals for the history of philosophy in the world.

When Bartuschat died in his house close to the Ohlsdorf cemetery, where he was buried on August 24, 2022, the German-speaking world lost one of its most prolific, influential, and inspiring interpreters of Spinoza.

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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 Verhandeling</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. In some cases line numbers may also be cited: e.g., G II 234, lines 1-8.

References to Pierre-François Moreau's *Œuvres complètes*: "O III 120" for volume 3, page 120.

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 followed (see *Collected Works*, Volume 1, pp. 458-62).

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

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

Citations of passages in the TP: same form for citations of the TTP but include the section number. E.g., TP 8.38/G III 341.

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, 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).

Alternatively, the English translation by Samuel Shirley is referred to as:

S: Spinoza, *Complete Works* with translations by Samuel Shirley. Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by Michael L. Morgan (Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis and Cambridge, 2002).

