

The Explainability of Experience

*Realism and Subjectivity in
Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind*

URSULA RENZ



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Preface

THIS BOOK RESULTS from many years of long and intensive reflection on the question of how Spinoza's theoretical philosophy must be conceived of in order to serve as the basis for his ethics and moral philosophy. I assumed from the start that the second part of the *Ethics* plays a major role in answering this question, but the project only came together when I gave up the Hegelian notion that Spinoza takes individual subjects to disappear into the one substance. It was also only after making this shift that it became possible for me to draw the parallels that I do between Spinoza and issues in contemporary philosophy of mind.

In writing the book, I was supported by several institutions, among which, the University of Zurich, where it was accepted as a habilitation thesis in the summer of 2007. From 2002 to 2003, I spent a year at Yale University and from 2003 to 2004, at the École Normale Supérieure in Lyon—both of these stays were supported by several fellowships from the Kanton Zurich. During the period in which the manuscript was written, I was supported by both the ETH Zurich and the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Without the encouragement and support of various people, this book would not have been possible. The conversations I had with Michael Della Rocca during my time at Yale not only challenged me in the most fruitful manner but also forced me to clarify the question behind my research and to sharpen my views on it. Pierre-François Moreau not only pointed to the need for more philological precision but also encouraged me to elaborate my novel views on the *Ethics*. Michael Hampe, who was always open for discussion, confronted me time and again with surprising empirical or historical facts. Helmut Holzhey was particularly important in the very beginning of this project. Significant comments came from the members of the habilitation committee, in particular Peter Schulthess and Hanjo Glock. Wolfgang Marx, who led the committee with great foresight, gave me the gift of a summer free of sorrows.

Various colleagues have been invaluable to my work on this over several years. Particular thanks go to Robert Schnepf who read the manuscript in several stages;

conversations with him were among my most important sources of inspiration. Thomas Kisser not only convinced me, long ago, of the philosophical import of Spinoza's approach but also helped me to understand Gueroult's commentaries. Many significant breakthroughs had their origins in conversations with Yitzhak Melamed, Troy Cross, Kathrin Hoenig, Hans-Bernhard Schmid, and Sibylla Lotter.

Encouragement came also from Marcel Senn, Mary Amschel, Leslie Wolf, Hilge Landweer, Angelica Baum, and Nicole Gengoux. The latter's hospitality also made it possible for me to attend several research seminars at the Sorbonne in Paris; thanks to her, I learned what it is to be a guest in France. I am deeply grateful to Hans Kessler who, in a precarious situation, read the whole manuscript and encouraged me to submit it as a habilitation thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank all those whose life has been affected, rather unwillingly, by my passion for philosophy, including my husband Charles, my parents, my siblings, Helen, Monika, and Patrick, and my neighbor Audrey. To their friendship I owe more than can be expressed.

Zurich/Copenhagen/Klagenfurt, 2009

Preface to the English Translation

EVERY BOOK HAS its story, and so does this translation. When I visited Yale shortly after Michael Della Rocca's review of the German original was published in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, I heard from Barbara Sattler that Michael, with her help, had made a partial translation in the course of the writing of his review. After the book was awarded the JHP prize, I was encouraged by several colleagues to publish a translation. This plan would never have been realized, though, were it not for the support of various people and institutions. The Austrian Science Foundation (FWF) supported the final translation, by Mark Ilseemann, through a translation grant.

I would like to thank various people without whom this translation would never have been finished. In particular, I would like to thank Barnaby Hutchins, who spent innumerable hours correcting the original translation and discussing problematic passages with me, while Namita Herzl copy-edited the manuscript. I also owe thanks to my research team at Klagenfurt, Namita Herzl, Barnaby Hutchins, Sarah Tropper, and Philip Waldner, who discussed the whole book with me at great length and helped greatly to clarify certain passages. I am very grateful to Peter Ohlin and Lucy Randall at Oxford University Press for their encouragement and patience, as well as their willingness to go through the whole complicated process.

When I discussed the translation with Mark Ilseemann and Barnaby Hutchins, we often preferred more liberal articulations over literal translations. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that while, over the years, many of my views on several details have changed, I am still, overall, committed to the reconstruction of Spinoza that I originally presented ten years ago. While the literature has progressed in that time, my overall views have not changed substantially, and I therefore present them here as originally set out. For this reason, it is only in rare places that I have added references to more recent literature.

While I did not dedicate the German version of this book to anyone—this is not always done in the German-speaking context—I want to dedicate this

English translation to my father, who passed away three years ago. Although not inclined toward philosophy himself, he never failed to love me for the person I am and to support me along the path I have taken.

Zurich/Klagenfurt, 2017

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Abbreviations

Descartes' Works

- AT Adam and Tannery (eds.), *Oeuvres de Descartes*
CSM Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch (eds. and trans.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (third volume edited by A. Kenny also)

Spinoza's Works

- C Curley (ed.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 & 2
CM *Cogitata Metaphysica* (an appendix to Spinoza's DPP)
DPP *Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae*, Parts I & II (*Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*)
Ep. Spinoza's Letters
KV *Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand* (*Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*)
NS *Nagelaten Schrift en* (the 1677 Dutch translation of Spinoza's works)
OP *Opera Posthuma*
TdIE *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*
TP *Tractatus Politicus*
TTP *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

Passages in Spinoza's *Ethics* are referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a-(xiom), c-(orollary), e-(xplanation), l-(emma), p-(roposition), s-(cholium), and app-(endix); "d" stands for either "definition" (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book) or "demonstration" (in all other cases). The five parts of the *Ethics* are cited by Arabic numerals. Thus, "E1d3" stands for the third definition of part 1 and "E1p16d" for the demonstration of

proposition 16 of part 1. Passages from DPP are cited using the same system of abbreviations used for the *Ethics*.

References to Gebhardt (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, follow this format: volume number, page number, line number. Hence, “II/200/12” stands for volume 2, page 200, line 12. Passages from AT are cited by volume and page number. Thus, “AT VII 23” stands for page 23 of volume 7 of this edition.

Introduction

THE EXPLAINABILITY OF EXPERIENCE

MANY TENETS OF Spinoza's theoretical philosophy, as laid out in the first parts of the *Ethics*, can be understood only against the backdrop of the central programmatic conviction that motivates the work as a whole. Put simply, in a manner that resonates with readers even today, this conviction can be expressed as follows: subjective experience is explainable, and its successful explanation is of ethical relevance because it makes us wiser, freer, and happier. Not only does this conviction guide Spinoza's major philosophical decisions, it also explains the lasting appeal of his chief work, which, for centuries, has attracted those readers who are truly willing to engage with it. Spinoza's insight corresponds to an expectation that often, and in a variety of contexts, motivates philosophical reflection: the desire to explain experience is, quite understandably, a central concern for many a philosophical mind.

But congenial as this concern may appear at first glance, to justify the conviction that subjective experience is explainable is a demanding task. It is not enough to elucidate the ontological premises underlying the intelligibility of beings in general; one must also be able to show that the perspectivity of subjective experience—often regarded as irreducible—does not rule out the idea of a general explainability. Furthermore, an anthropologically informed conception of how human beings perceive certain things and events must be developed. In other words, it must be explained how experiential content is formed by the interpretive activity that human beings are capable of. Finally, it must be shown that the explainability of experience contributes to a good life, at all relevant levels: from questions surrounding the organization of the body politic to liberation from neurotic fixations to discussions of a person's individual need of

salvation. Spinoza's *Ethics* attempts all of this, even if the attempt is not fully convincing in all aspects.

I will not be able, in the present reconstruction, to spell out this entire enterprise. I want only to describe the theory of the human mind on which that program is based. That is not to say that I am limiting myself to marginal issues; rather, I am focusing on the systematic center, as it were, of the program outlined above. The theory of the human mind is central, not simply because it appears in the middle of the *Ethics*, as far as the organization of the text is concerned. More importantly, it is central because not every conception of the mental is compatible with the concern about the explainability of experience. Whether the intuition that experience is explainable makes sense or not depends, crucially, on how the human mind is conceptualized and how its activities are described.

It is the main thesis of this study that Spinoza contemplated this connection more than any other philosopher has. Hence, the question of what is required to show that experience is something that can be explained will also be used to reconstruct and elucidate the most important decisions, concepts, and arguments that Spinoza develops in the *Ethics* with regard to the human mind. As it turns out, many passages of the *Ethics* that are barely comprehensible, thanks to their terseness and the rather technical language of the entire work, suddenly become plausible if considered against this background. Thus, Spinoza's theory of the human mind will be analyzed according to the way in which it takes into account the assumption that human experience is explainable. On the one hand, that means elucidating the requirements that any philosophy of the human mind would have to fulfill to make such a claim. On the other hand, it means addressing the many problems of comprehension that confront any reader of Spinoza's theory of the human mind.

Before I begin, I would like to spell out a few of the fundamental considerations that lie behind this conviction, as well as comment a little further on some of the methodological premises of this study.

a) Priority and Justification of Realistic Rationalism

Faced with a subjective experience—such as the anguish we may feel upon the death of a close friend from cancer—philosophers are generally presented with two possibilities. On the one hand, they can invoke the impression that often occurs in those moments, namely that experiences of this kind are accessible only to ourselves. And they will therefore maintain that subjective experience is

something that radically eludes concepts employed by us to describe other theoretical entities and that, if experience is to be accessed intersubjectively at all, different categorical and epistemic means would be required. On the other hand, philosophers can also insist that subjective experience can generally be grasped with the same concepts that we employ to describe processes such as the collision of two billiard balls, despite the fact that each subjective experience is structured in such a way that it affects one person in particular. Our experience after being told that our friend has died is different from, say, that of his brother after receiving the same message. And yet, I argue, both experiences are epistemically accessible from a neutral point of view. In other words, a philosopher can also insist that each experience is explainable or intelligible in a strict sense, and not only comprehensible through empathy or in its subjective meaningfulness.¹

Now, whoever subscribes to the latter position does not yet require any detailed insight into exactly *how* subjective experiences are to be apprehended. Nor is it necessary to maintain that this explaining depends, exclusively or at least primarily, on scientific methods, nor that it requires any specific knowledge in particular—for instance, knowledge about the neural network of the human brain and the functions assigned to its different regions. Thus, nothing forces the second position into a reductionist scientism; at the same time, nothing forces it to hold the sciences in contempt either.

Our discussion regarding the explainability of experience is therefore different from the debate, currently underway among theorists of consciousness, as to whether consciousness lends itself to a strictly scientific explanation and whether or not it is reducible to physical facts in a wide sense.² What the proponents of such a scientific approach advocate exceeds the mere assumption that experience is explainable in that they favor certain types of explanation while excluding others—for instance, narrative accounts. On the other hand, some of the theorists of consciousness who argue in an anti-scientistic vein would surely

1. Thus, my argument is not informed by the opposition of explanation vs. understanding (*Erklären* vs. *Verstehen*), which often comes up in discussions about the difference between the humanities and the natural sciences. For information about this debate, see, e.g., Von Wright 1971; Essler 1975; Patzig 1980; and Riedel 1978. As will be shown numerous times, Spinoza's realistic rationalism is not aligned with this discussion. See also Part IV, Chapter 14, § e.

2. Those arguing for the scientific explainability of consciousness include, from a neurophysiological standpoint, Crick and Koch 1997; Damasio 1994, 1999, 2003; from a philosophical standpoint, Dennett 1991; Dretske 1995; Tye 1995; Pauen 1999. Rosenthal 1991 also affirms that consciousness is explainable, albeit without subscribing to any kind of materialism. Among those opposing the scientific explainability of consciousness are, above all, Kripke 1980; Nagel 1974, 1986; McGinn 1991; Jackson 2004; Levine 2004. The number of publications generated by this discussion has by now become overwhelming.

admit that subjective experience can be accounted for in some way or another, even if it cannot necessarily be explained with the instruments of the exact natural sciences.³

Affirming that experience is explainable does not entail that phenomena of consciousness must supervene on, let alone be reducible to, physical entities. The intuition we are dealing with here is both more ambitious and less ambitious than that. If we want to consider experience to be explainable, we must be able to justify the following assumption: provided we know all the factors that influence someone's experience directly or indirectly, we must be able (so the assumption goes) to comprehend another person's affective state arising at the occasion of a certain event, without thereby necessarily creating the same affective state in ourselves. This assumption is less ambitious than some materialistic scenarios in that it refrains from implying that there must always exist a purely scientific explanation for our way of experiencing things. At the same time, however, it is more ambitious in that any successful explanation of experience requires a lot of background knowledge. To explain the experience of anguish following the sudden death of a friend, for instance, we have to know not only about the relationship the person had to that friend but also about such things as the situation he was in when he received the message, his prior experiences with cases of fatality, how he thinks about death in general, etc.

Whether a philosophical position of this kind—let us refer to it as *realistic rationalism*—is justified largely depends on three conditions. First and foremost, a realistic rationalism must be able to make plausible that everything that is or that happens can in principle be grasped or comprehended—that every being is, to use a traditional term, intelligible. The rationalism that will be the subject of the following discussion therefore has an ontological, rather than an epistemological, foundation; it proceeds neither from positing innate ideas⁴ nor from deriving all possible knowledge from simple and intuitively cognizable ideas but from the general assumption that all being is fully intelligible.

Second, in order to justify the thesis that experience is explainable, one must make sure that what we seek to understand does not coincide with the act of understanding it but that its existence is ontologically prior to its being understood

3. Chalmers 1996, for instance, makes this conception the basis for his theory of consciousness.

4. That the notion of innate ideas doesn't play a big role in my reconstruction is among the most important differences between my reconstruction of Spinoza's theory of the human mind and the one proposed by Marshall 2013. (Note added to the English translation.)

or known. With regard to experience, that means that experiencing is prior to its being explained.⁵ If (and only if) that is the case, experience is not only explainable but also, at the same time, conceivable in its difference from its explanation. And only in that case does rationalism avoid lapsing into absolute idealism—and it is this that justifies its claim to be a realistic rationalism.

These two conditions give rise to a third, a methodical condition, as it were, that must be met by the realistic rationalism outlined above. It must be possible, in principle, to secure the intelligibility of human experience within the concepts already employed in our attempt to grasp beings as beings with metaphysical intent. Only then is the full intelligibility of all being compatible with realism.

As will be shown later on, this position corresponds rather precisely to the approach developed by Spinoza in the first few propositions of the second part of the *Ethics* and thus at the very outset of his philosophy of mind.⁶ In my opinion, his rationalism is a *realistic* rationalism—and not, as many commentators assume or read into him, an *idealistic* one.⁷ However, this is not yet the time for a precise characterization of Spinoza's rationalism; instead, we should inquire into the reasons that might compel us to grant this kind of position priority over its many conceivable alternatives—for instance, that the notion of experience is itself considered a fundamental concept in the philosophy of mind or that any conceptual difference is abandoned, either between experiencing and comprehending or between being and knowing.

This kind of realistic rationalism is chiefly supported by a conviction on which our everyday conception of knowledge is implicitly based. The conviction is that knowledge refers to something else, something whose origin is not itself knowledge. I consider this conviction indispensable because it illuminates better than anything else what drives us, in the end, whenever we want to know

5. This does not rule out that current experiences can be shaped by earlier explanations, nor that our current notions are capable of defining our future experiences. In this context, see Part IV, Chapter 13, § b, as well as Chapter 14, § b.

6. See Part I, Chapter 3.

7. Among those who construe Spinoza's rationalism as a—potentially absolute—form of idealism are Gueroult 1968; Della Rocca 2002, 2003a; see also Della Rocca 2005 for argumentative background. Deleuze 1992 also moves in that direction. From these kinds of idealistic interpretations, which conceive of Spinoza's approach as a closed system of concepts lacking external referents, we must distinguish reconstructions that tend to see transcendental arguments at work in the *Ethics*. Such is the case in Della Rocca 2011, for example. In contrast to the interpretation advanced in Della Rocca 2003a and 2005, his reconstruction from 2011 is compatible with my reading here.

something. Our objective, so to speak, is to somehow relate our thought to something external to thought.⁸ On the other hand, this conviction has little to say about how we generate knowledge in specific cases. That is why it is generally compatible with different modelings of the process of understanding. Thus, this conviction has to be taken into account only when it comes to the conceptual question of what knowledge actually is; if we want to explain how knowledge is acquired, it is irrelevant. It is perfectly possible to retain this conviction without advocating a naive realism, which assumes that things are just like we see them. On the other hand, an approach of this kind is perfectly capable of describing the cognitive activities at play in any effort of the understanding as a constructive process. Doing so would by no means imply that the realistic claim—that we are actually referring to something real—would have to be rejected (as epistemological constructivists would have it).⁹ Anyone who maintains that the intended object of knowledge is something real—something external to knowledge—does not therefore have to assume that that which knowledge refers to as its object is immediately given. Thus, the conviction mentioned above merely indicates a necessary condition for a meaningful philosophical definition of the *concept* of knowledge; what it does *not* do is form the basis for explaining the *procedure* by which we acquire knowledge.

Knowledge somehow relates to something external to thought—this conviction strongly supports the second of the two aforementioned premises on which any realistic rationalism is based, namely that in distinguishing between being and knowledge, being must be given primacy. In fact, the idea that knowledge refers to something external to itself only makes sense if we insist both on this distinction and on the primacy of being over knowing.

Yet, there are interpretations of Spinoza—especially among those who read him as a radical rationalist—that deny any such distinction between being and knowledge. Michael Della Rocca, for instance, in his interpretation of the *Ethics*, argues that a radical rationalism must make existence and intelligibility identical.¹⁰ It remains to be seen which kind of rationalism is better attuned to

8. The aforementioned conviction has been formulated with classic precision by Kant, in the context of his limitation of all possible speculative rational knowledge to objects of experience; see the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, B XXVI (1956).

9. This is why the conception of knowledge outlined above is actually compatible with a number of philosophical positions that at first glance seem to be committed to contrary positions—for instance, as mentioned above, certain forms of constructivism. Ernst Cassirer's theory of symbols can serve as a good example for an epistemology that combines a realistic conception of knowledge with the ultimately idealistic assumption that the processes by which knowledge is acquired are, in fact, constructive activities.

10. Della Rocca 2003a, 82–3.

Spinoza's—Della Rocca's idealistic variant or my own realistic version. My aim, in this book, is merely to lend plausibility to my realistic approach by questioning the counterintuitive identification of existence and intelligibility. Della Rocca's line of argument is mostly based on a twofold use of the principle of sufficient reason. In his opinion, this principle not only demands a *sufficient explanation* for the way things are; it also requires that states of affairs awaiting explanation be *ontologically reduced* to their intelligibility. He further maintains that this affects not only explanations of cause and effect but also explanations of existence—and not only the existence of Spinoza's God but also the existence of finite things. According to Della Rocca, a fully consistent rationalism does not merely postulate that the existence of all things is intelligible; it also postulates that the existence of anything *consists in* its being intelligible. Thus, it no longer distinguishes between a thing's intelligibility and the instantiation of its existence.

This, however, does not untie the Gordian knot; it merely cuts it. This is because the second use of the principle of sufficient reason—the one that postulates ontological reducibility—surreptitiously delegitimizes the very problem that such a reduction is meant to solve in the first place. If the fact that a thing exists collapses with its being intelligible—that is to say, if there is no difference between intelligibility and the instantiation of existence—then it becomes impossible to comprehend why the being of things can be perceived as something that needs to be explained in the first place. But that runs counter to the fact that very many things allow us to ask why they exist. Ontologically reducing the existence of things to their being intelligible does not answer the question of their being or non-being; it merely eliminates it. Thus, a rationalism that identifies existence with intelligibility deprives itself of its own motivation.

In contrast to Della Rocca, I therefore consider it imperative to retain the difference between intelligibility and existence—and, by extension, the metaphysical primacy of being over knowing. Doing so does not in any way curtail the power of explanatory statements. I can easily label the existence of Jupiter's moons as intelligible without having to maintain that their existence consists in their being intelligible. Such a primacy of being over knowing merely stipulates how we are to think about intelligibility. Much like the intuitive conception of knowledge outlined above, intelligibility consists in something's being able to be understood, while not itself being an act of understanding. That is, understanding bottoms out in something beyond understanding. At this point, it is not yet clear how such a primacy is to be defined in detail; what is clear, however, is that it makes sense for a rationalist to assume that such a primacy exists.

Thus, the realistic rationalism outlined above is well prepared to answer to the objections raised by the proponents of idealistic rationalism. Next, we should address the opposite question, why this kind of realistic rationalism should also

be considered superior to an approach that conceives of subjective experience as a fundamental concept in the philosophy of mind. As indicated above, this decision is informed by yet another reference to everyday experience, namely that it is possible, at least in principle, to gain access to other subjects' experiences without having those experiences ourselves.

It is hard to deny that this is indeed an intuition we have. Many of our social and cultural practices are based on it—from the simple query “how are you?” to practices of psychological counseling and therapy to reading novels. Yet, it is debatable whether we can actually rely on this intuition in the case that concerns us here. Have I not admitted myself, in extrapolating from the example above, that it is one thing to try to comprehend (someone else's) experiences and another thing altogether to have them oneself? Would it not be necessary, then, for the sake of consistency, to stipulate a categorical difference between subjective experience, on the one hand, and explaining/understanding, on the other?

Naturally, there is a significant difference between having an experience and explaining it. To experience something physically creates a different perspective from approaching it “only” theoretically. In philosophical discussions, this difference is often metaphorically accounted for by distinguishing between first- and third-person perspectives. In some sense, this difference cannot be overcome because it is based on different ways of participating (or not participating) in events. The question of what consequences this difference has for our topic (the explainability of experience) arises.

In and by itself, recognizing the difference between various ways to participate in an event poses no difficulties for the realistic rationalism proposed by this study. On the contrary, to assume such a difference is quite in agreement with the realistic premises discussed above. However, in certain cases this difference can be so profound as to create a gulf between someone having an experience and someone trying to grasp or explain that very experience—so that people simply cannot understand each other anymore. In light of this potential danger, we may ask ourselves whether the difference between the first and the third person may not, after all, have a greater impact on the question of whether experience is explainable. Must we not assume that this difference strictly precludes the explainability of subjective experience?

That strikes me as questionable. Let us assume that experience and explanation are two different, mutually irreducible processes and that we therefore have to distinguish between the perspective of the first person and the perspective of the third person. This does not imply that descriptions of experiences, as they are produced by subjects from the first-person perspective, cannot be made congruent with descriptions of those very same experiences from the third-person

perspective. On the contrary, if we were to infer such a fundamental epistemic limitation from this difference in perspective, we would also indirectly deny the existence of a common language, shared by someone wanting to express her experiences and someone seeking to comprehend what the other person has experienced. In other words, we would have to maintain that there exists a categorical difference between concepts belonging to the first-person perspective and concepts belonging to the third-person perspective. This claim, however, becomes problematic as soon as we examine its implications a little more closely. Not only does it categorically rule out any reflection about one's own experiences from a neutral point of view—and thus, the possibility of rationalizing one's own mental states—but it also calls into question any rational communication about one's own, or another's, experiences.

But it is something else that strikes me as even more important here. Let us examine the assumption that there exists an insurmountable difference between the first- and the third-person perspectives and that this is the case not only with respect to actual involvement in certain events but also with respect to the concepts used in the description. In my opinion, such an assumption derives from conflating the principal problem of the explainability of experience with the specific impression that emerges when human beings have trouble comprehending their diverging views of things. To be sure, we all know situations in which we have had that impression. But the question arises as to what we are to make of that impression—probably not that the other person does not know *what* experience is or that she is not aware that having an experience and explaining one are different things. At the utmost, we can conclude that the other person has not grasped *which* experience we have had in this case.

If we take this idea seriously, we have to assume that the difference between the first and the third person—and that between the first and the second person—does not affect the philosophical question of whether experience is explainable *per se* but merely the explanation of particular experiences. In this more limited regard, however, the difference between two perspectives does not have to result in the impression that we are dealing with an unbridgeable gap. On the contrary, we can also conceive of explanations as *gradually approaching* the perspective of the experiencing subject from a third- or second-person perspective. In ordinary life, we frequently assume the possibility of such gradual approximation, for instance, when we say about someone that she had grasped *quite accurately* what had happened to us in a certain situation or when we say, after an effort to clear the air following a hurtful argument with a friend, “Well, had I known that, then I would have *better* understood why you were so offended by my remark.” We apparently assume that others can grasp our experiences more or less accurately and that their explanations can be more or less approximate to the actual state of

affairs. Obviously, there exists a whole spectrum of possibilities between the extreme cases of not being able to understand something *at all* and understanding it *completely*.

That raises the following question: could we not just as well conceive of the difference between the first and the third person in terms of a *relative epistemic proximity* and *distance between differing points of view*, instead of assuming a categorical distinction? Such an approach would have the advantage that the struggle to explain our own experience would be based on the same theoretical foundation as the problem of explaining somebody else's experience or even experiences that strike us as wholly unfamiliar. Both phenomena—the *reflexive distance* we adopt toward ourselves when we seek to better understand our own experiences and the *historical, cultural, natural, or biographical difference of backgrounds* we are confronted with when we try to explain the experience of other subjects—can be reconstructed in terms of a relative proximity and distance between points of view. In both cases we can more or less approximate the actual state of affairs, and in both cases how close we get depends on the concrete premises from which we proceed.

Considered in this light, the difference between first-person experiencing and third-person explaining no longer constitutes a fundamental objection to the explainability of experience. We can accept this difference as a fact and nonetheless stop short of concluding that it carries such heavy categorical weight as to require two different conceptual systems, as it were. On the contrary, to draw such a conclusion would significantly disavow our everyday practice, for the difference between the first- and the third-person perspectives obviously does not lead us to stop communicating about personal experiences altogether, which confirms the assumption that we are dealing with an issue of relative proximity and distance between points of view. And even if we must painfully notice, again and again, that this kind of communication often does not succeed, then factual difficulties are to blame, rather than a fundamental problem.

Another objection could be raised here. Within the framework of the outlined approach, how are we to account for those qualitative aspects of experience that can only be known if one has experienced them oneself? In my view, even a question such as “What's it like to be x?”—frequently evoked in the debate about qualia—can be analyzed as an issue of relative proximity and distance.¹¹ While that does not fully solve the problem surrounding qualia, it dramatically reduces its significance. The extent to which it is possible for us to grasp qualitative aspects of experiences is *at least also* a question of the premises available

11. *Loci classici* are Nagel 1974 and Jackson 2004. For the connection between Nagel's bat example and Spinoza, see also Renz 2009c.

to us. For instance, if we want to grasp what it is like for someone to have his wisdom teeth pulled out, then the irreducibly qualitative aspect of mere pain sensation appears more like a marginal phenomenon, all but paling in comparison with other aspects. Thus, let us imagine someone who knows a great deal about the physiology of toothaches, who is familiar with the symbolic and cultural–historical significance of the act of tooth-pulling (Thomas Buddenbrook died from a tooth extraction, after all), someone who, furthermore, is acquainted with the person suffering from toothache, having previously witnessed her reaction to physical pain in general—would someone like that not have a better idea of what it's like to be that person with a toothache than would someone insisting on having experienced the qualia of a toothache himself?

Something similar could be said about bat experiences, which in turn are not altogether different from experiences had by people from other cultures or other historical periods. It is just as unlikely for us to fully understand how Spinoza must have felt when he fled Amsterdam following an assassination attempt as it is unlikely for us to know precisely what it's like to be a bat or how a fattened pig must feel when led to the slaughter, panicking over the smell of blood. In all these cases, we are prevented from genuinely reliving another subject's experiences. Even if we wanted to, we simply cannot have those same experiences. And yet it is possible, in all these cases, to access these experiences on a conceptual level. Any feeling person willing to acquire the appropriate physical, biological, historical, and biographical knowledge will be perfectly able to gain a theoretical understanding of what it's like to use ultrasonic waves to orient oneself in space or how Spinoza must have felt escaping from Amsterdam. In both cases, we are prevented from having the experience ourselves, on account of either temporal distance or biological differences. That does not, however, contradict our assumption that phenomena such as these can be explained.

All these remarks have significant consequences for the conception of the human mind—which, even though it may not be the exclusive subject of experience, is frequently considered to be what lends meaning to an event, thus constituting an experience for us. I can only provide a few hints here. Let us assume that the problem raised by the difference between the first and the third person does not pertain to the explainability of experience *per se* but only to the explainability of specific experiences. If that is the case, then it does not make much sense to regard being-a-subject as the defining characteristic of the mind and such; rather, it is only a condition for instantiating individual minds. This does not mean that the question of how a subject of experience is constituted is any less important. On the contrary, the conditions for the instantiation of individual minds determine what it is that separates us into numerically different subjects, despite our ability to explain experiences supraindividually. However,

pointing out that subjects are numerically or qualitatively different will no longer be a compelling objection to the claim that experience can in principle be explained. This means, in turn, that two convictions that we both affirm yet often consider to be mutually exclusive—that experience is irreducibly subjective and that there exist better and worse explanations of experience—are actually, surprisingly, compatible.

We still have to counter one final objection. Could it be that an approach of the kind I have outlined here might lead to scientific reductionism, eliminating the subjective element in experience rather than acknowledging it? I think not. However, when considering this problem, it is crucial to keep in mind that our basic philosophical thesis—experience is explainable—is not itself an explanation. It is one thing to maintain that experience can be explained but another to actually go ahead and explain it. In this book, I will discuss only the former, the thesis that experience can be explained; furthermore, this will be a discussion that proceeds from Spinoza's *Ethics*. The *Ethics* can serve as a model for a philosophical approach that corroborates our thesis on different levels while also containing a number of theoretical sketches; what it does not do, however, is outline any one-dimensional theory.

I intend to show, therefore, how the philosophical approach developed in the *Ethics* deals with the question of whether experience is explainable. The focus on Spinoza derives from my conviction that his response to this problem stands out as one of the most interesting and mature responses in the history of philosophy. However, a great hermeneutic—and argumentative—effort is required to make this plausible, for Spinoza's most crucial insights are rarely unconcealed. For instance, it is not very helpful, in this context, to look for Latin equivalents for the concept of explanation that I use here. Apparent candidates abound—there is the technical expression *explicatio*, for instance, or the verb *intelligere*, which often appears in pivotal passages.¹² Yet, these findings should be treated with caution. *Explicatio*, for instance, is a technical term whose application is limited to specific aspects within the larger task of explaining experience and whose real significance can only be discerned against the backdrop of Spinoza's implicit rejection of the epistemological foundationalism that characterizes Cartesian logic.¹³ Likewise, when Spinoza postulates an *intelligere*

12. For the latter, see the preface to Part Three of the *Ethics*, in which Spinoza opposes those who “curse and laugh at the affects and actions of men, rather than understand them” (C I, 492; G II, 138).

13. In this context, see also the remarks in Part II, Chapter 4, as well as Part II, Chapter 4.

of our affects and actions, we can only understand what exactly that means if we keep in mind from what kind of position he is trying to distance himself.¹⁴ The concept of “explanation” that Spinoza’s approach suggests can be understood only after these preliminary inquiries. Something quite similar applies to the Latin equivalent for the other eponymous term of the present book, *experientia*. While it is true that Spinoza makes systematic use of this term—as Pierre-François Moreau has shown in his work¹⁵—it almost never appears in the *Ethics* in any sense that would be relevant for the conception of the mind. Subjective experience is referred to many times, of course—but usually through expressions such as *idea*, *affectus*, and *perceptio* or through phrases such as *ideae affectionum corporis*.¹⁶

This is why I proceed here not from an exegesis of individual terms but from an analysis of the implicit theoretical structure laid out in the second part of the *Ethics*, which deals with the human mind. I intend to reconstruct this theoretical structure and to discuss its implications for the question of whether experience is explainable. The merits of Spinoza’s theory of the human mind reveal themselves only against this background. We can happily leave open for now the question to what extent we are ultimately willing to agree with him. His theory of the human mind can also be taken as a model that demonstrates under which conditions our question—“Is experience explainable?”—can be answered in the affirmative. Some of the connections shown in what follows will make sense even to those who do not share all of Spinoza’s premises or, what is trickier, are able to identify apparent ambiguities.

In one respect, however, it is perfectly unambiguous what Spinoza’s approach amounts to: as the final sentence of the *Ethics* makes unmistakably clear, even a realistic rationalist must expect great concrete difficulties when it comes to explaining her own experiences. That is not really surprising. For we shall find ample evidence that explaining subjective experience is a highly laborious and demanding task. It is, therefore, not to be expected that our contemplating subjective experience will ever be simple, let alone trivial.

14. See also Part IV, Chapter 14.

15. Moreau 1994a. As shown in Part IV, Chapter 12, there is a terminological equivalent to the notion of subjective experience in the *Ethics*: the idea of the affections of the body. Yet this becomes apparent only through the reconstruction of Spinoza’s theory of the human mind, rather than through an analysis of his use of terms.

16. See Part IV, Chapter 12 and the introduction to the chapter dealing with the notion of ideas in Part II, Chapter 5.

b) *The Different Levels of Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind*

As we have already seen, advocating a view that allows for the explainability of experience forces us to tackle problems on altogether separate levels. It is one thing to justify the thesis that subjective experience is explainable but another to explicate the structures that cause an event to become a certain subject's experience. And it is something else again to discuss the means by which experience is determined in its quality and content.

Corresponding to these three problems are three parts of Spinoza's theory of the human mind. This theory can be divided into the following essential areas:

1. First of all, a kind of *ontology of the mental* sets out to elucidate the fundamental relationship between being and thought, justifying the assumption of a rationalist realism to analyze the mental. Specifically, this legitimizes the assumption that, in principle, everything that exists is intelligible and related to a single concept of reality. On the other hand, this ontology of the mental also comprises fundamental reflections about the logic of ideas, which constitute the contents of experiences. On the whole, Spinoza's "ideas" are largely equivalent to what we refer to today—no less vaguely—as mental states. However, the question here is how we are to conceptualize ideas or mental states in such a way as would allow us to explain the occurrence of very specific ideas or mental states in a later step. Spinoza elaborates on this question in two places, although in part only indirectly—it is the subject of what amounts to an implicit discussion both of Descartes and of certain objections raised by Hobbes against Descartes' concept of ideas. This discussion takes place partly in the definitions centered around the concept of ideas and partly in the last two propositions of the second part, which again—as a kind of review, so to speak—deal with the character and necessity of ideas. Last but not least, the ontology of the mental also includes explanations about the relationship between body and mind, explanations that are peculiar in that they occur prior to Spinoza's discussion of the concept of mind in the *Ethics*.
2. The *concept of the human mind* is defined only after Spinoza sets out the ontology of the mental. This definition is based in part on completely different premises from those used to establish the ontology of the mental. Moreover, the question addressed in defining the concept of the human mind asks not simply what the human mind is but how minds are individuated. While deriving his concept of *mens humana*, Spinoza grapples extensively with the question of what it is, in the end, that constitutes singular, finite minds—or, in other words, what makes distinct subjects *numerically different*. At first

glance, discussing this question might seem superfluous, given that we usually consider it a matter of course that individual people are distinct from each other as subjects. In the context of Spinoza's monistic approach, however, this is far less self-evident. That is why even such a seemingly indubitable intuition—that discrete subjects are numerically different—has to be justified. As I will show in Part II, Spinoza's definition of the human mind as idea of the body can be conceived as an answer to this question. That only works, however, if we read the entire passage culminating in this definition not simply as a supplement to the ontology of the mental but as something that could in a nutshell be considered a *theory or conception of the human subject*.

3. Finally, there is yet another part of Spinoza's theory that must be distinguished from both the ontology of the mental and the theory of the subject; this part deals with the *content of experiences*. Roughly speaking, it does so from two different points of view: one psychological, the other epistemological. From a psychological perspective, Spinoza first sets out to shape the *cognitive genesis* of content, which happens in the context of his theory of *imaginatio*. On the other hand—and this falls within the purview of his theory of affects—he discusses the principles and mechanisms that help us explain why experiences can be emotionally charged, which gives them the quality of lived experience. A peculiar—and not entirely unproblematic—feature of Spinoza's approach is that it also discusses experiential content from an epistemological point of view. This is due to a peculiarity in his concept of ideas, according to which all mental phenomena—and not just cognition or thought, to use a neutral, merely psychological term—constitute knowledge in an epistemological sense. As a consequence, all experiences can be analyzed and evaluated with regard to their epistemic content or value. In his epistemology, Spinoza discusses the principles underlying this evaluation. At the same time, he demonstrates why a change in what we know about our own experiences can result in a change at the level of experience itself. Assuming this double function, Spinoza's epistemology forms a decisive bridge between his theoretical and practical philosophy, for it is by improving our knowledge of our own experience—and human experience in general—that Spinoza thinks we can become wiser, freer, and happier.

Needless to say, these different theoretical parts are conceptually and theoretically intertwined. At the same time, however, the coherence of Spinoza's thoughts often depends on carefully distinguishing between the separate theoretical levels. To fully understand Spinoza, it is therefore absolutely crucial that any reconstruction of his argument takes these distinctions into account. It is further

worth mentioning that Spinoza, in the part of the *Ethics* that deals with the constitution of experiential content—and it must be emphasized that he does so only there and not earlier—uses external, that is, physical, insights as an explanatory basis. This is important because, in terms of theory-building, it marks the systematic place where scientific insights that Spinoza could not have foreseen can be attached to his model of a theory of the human mind. Whatever is found to influence our thought—be it neurophysiological, biological, semantic, psychoanalytic, or part of the history of mentalities—can thus be acknowledged as formative for the content of human experience without necessitating any fundamental changes at the level of either the ontology of the mental or the theory of the subject.

One of the main assumptions behind my reading here, then, is that Spinoza's systematic contribution to the philosophy of mind resides in the way in which he both distinguishes and combines genuinely different explanatory levels. In contrast to many commentators who have been inspired by analytic philosophy of mind, I do not think that Spinoza's chief accomplishment, in his theory of the human mind, is the response he gives to the mind–body problem. Rather, it is his attempt to *outline an integrative model of a theory of the human mind*, thereby laying the theoretical foundation for the argument that subjective experience—including its biological, historical, epistemic, and social determinants—is explainable. In the following, I want to reconstruct this model and elucidate its premises and consequences for the question of how human experience can be explained. While doing so, I shall discuss technical problems, as well as similarities with and differences from current discussions, insofar as they help to explicate the decisions underlying Spinoza's model of the human mind.

c) *Foundations of Knowledge: On the Structure of the Second Part of the Ethics*

Spinoza's theory of the human mind, as outlined above, distinguishes between four theoretical levels (ontology of the mental, conception of finite minds or theory of the subject, psychology, and epistemology)—a view that is at least partially confirmed once we examine the structure of *de Mente* a little more carefully. Generally speaking, it may not seem very innovative to simply divide the text into separate sections. Every commentator who approaches the *Ethics* as a comprehensive philosophical work (rather than just with a specific, detailed problem in mind) starts by proposing an arrangement for the individual parts. Such arrangements assign thematic complexes to the individual passages of text, which often vary from commentary to commentary.

This raises the delicate question of the criteria used in each arrangement. It is rarely obvious from the text at exactly which point a topic is finished.¹⁷ Even looking at the physical excursus following 2p13, it remains unclear, at first, whether it starts a new section or concludes the previous thoughts or whether the analysis of a specific topic is simply interrupted as needed. Relying on formal aspects of the text¹⁸ or on traditional standards is helpful only with regard to certain questions.¹⁹ Thus, most commentators largely follow their intuition to determine what is being discussed in individual passages.²⁰

In contrast to traditional commentaries, I proceed from an arrangement that takes its cue not simply from thematic considerations but rather from the premises referenced by the arguments in the various passages. As it turns out, an analysis of the premises underlying the demonstrations contained in different passages reveals a surprisingly systematic picture:²¹

1. All propositions up to and including 2p7 are largely based on propositions from Part One.²² The thesis developed in 2p8, however, is the first that does not directly refer back to the first part, and starting with 2p9, references to earlier propositions from the second part significantly increase in number. While it happens only twice during the first seven propositions that we find references to an earlier proposition from the second part (in 2p3 and 2p5), there are twenty-three such references between 2p8 and 2p13 alone. Apparently, the first seven propositions of the second part—including the metaphysical identity theory laid out in 2p7—are based more directly than subsequent passages on metaphysical considerations. We can therefore fully assume that, in these propositions, Spinoza is primarily concerned with conceptual questions that can be solved in connection with the metaphysics of the first part.

17. This is easily confirmed, for instance, by comparing the following commentaries on the *Ethics*: Gueroult 1968, 1974; Bennett 1984; Bartuschat 1992a; Macherey 1994, 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1998.

18. Bartuschat 1992a, 71, divides Part Two in analogy to the metaphysical axioms of Part One.

19. Gueroult 1974, for instance, takes recourse to traditional categories when he justifies why 2p48 and 2p49—both concerned with the concept of will—still belong to Part Two rather than Part Three, as one would expect.

20. Bennett and Macherey, in particular, proceed in this way, as does Gueroult in certain places. It is also worth mentioning, however, that intuitions cannot be fully discounted.

21. Points of reference for this analysis are Jonathan Bennett's *Deductive Ancestry* (unpublished) and R. M. Mattern's *Index of References* (1979). While these two instruments have existed for some time and are widely used by American Spinoza experts, they are rarely employed systematically. To the best of my knowledge, Spinoza's use of various premise types, with varying frequency, in different passages has not been noted by anyone so far, let alone evaluated systematically.

22. All told, the second part contains fifty references to passages from the first part. Seventeen of those references point to the first seven propositions alone.

2. All in all, the entire *Ethics* contains only eight references to the five axioms of the second part, and all those references occur within the same part. By comparison, the number of references to the axioms of the first part is three times higher, at twenty-six. Furthermore, in contrast to the axioms from the second part, the axioms from the first are also used in the second, fourth, and fifth parts. What is striking about those few applications of the axioms from the second part is that, barring two exceptions, they all occur in propositions 2p10, 2p11, and 2p13 (five times in 2p11 and 2p13 alone)—precisely those propositions that define the eponymous concept of the second part, the *mens humana*.²³ This is significant largely because all these axioms—in contrast to those of the first part, which represent a priori, conceptual truths—refer, in one way or another, to an experience supported through history or phenomenology.²⁴ Yet, in reaction to Descartes' *cogito*, these experiences do not represent absolute certainties; instead, they designate phenomenological facts that put external constraints on theory formation.²⁵ Since these axioms are referred to only rarely and in connection with definitional issues, we can further conclude that they are relevant only for specific areas of the theoretical construct: apparently, Spinoza needs to assume the existence of phenomenological facts mainly to lend credibility to his *concept* of the human mind, together with fundamental limitations to human knowledge that may come with it; he no longer needs this assumption when he actually gets to the analysis of the *contents of our minds*.²⁶

23. It could be objected here that the second part's title contains only the word "*mens*," not the phrase "*mens humana*." There are good reasons to assume, however, that the term "*mens*"—in contrast to the term "*corpus*"—is terminologically reserved for human beings. First of all, Spinoza never mentions a *mens divina* but only refers to an *intellectus infinitus*. Second, the passage in which he allegedly advocates a so-called panpsychism does not say that all things are endowed with a *mens*—it only alleges that they are animatae (G II, 96; C I, 457). Finally, as Jaquet 2004, 141–2, makes clear, Spinoza's political writings refer to the mind of bodies politic only conditionally: they are merely *quasi una mente*. For this last point, see also Part I, Chapter 2.

24. See Gueroult 1974, 31, or Bartuschat 1992a, 65.

25. Moreau 1994a, 519, has pointed out that these axioms are convincing due to the presence of their theses, not because they maintain evident and necessary truths. I agree with this view, insofar as the axioms of the second part are not—unlike those of the first part—apodictic in their validity but instead recall facts that are based on external, historical, and phenomenological insights. I consider it problematic, however, to conclude that their theoretical validity must therefore be limited. In some sense, the axioms do indeed set parameters that originate outside of the theory; but, on the other hand, they play an essential role in the construction of the theory—a role they can only fulfill if their validity is taken for granted.

26. This is true also for the use of 2ax1 in 2p30, and the use of 2ax3 in 2p49. 2p30 refers back to 2ax1, an axiom that deals with the historically attested finitude of the human being, in order

3. After discussing the concept of mind, Spinoza inserts an excursus that examines—in the form of a rough outline—several assumptions related to physics and the physical–physiological constitution of individual bodies. This insertion is not simply thematically motivated; rather, it provides additional premises that will later be needed for subsequent parts of the argument. It is important to realize that these propositions are not all of the kind whose certainty can be considered proven from within the system; they also include borrowed propositions, or *lemmata*, that serve as a vehicle for knowledge from scientific disciplines that cannot per se be considered part of the theoretical body of the *Ethics*. Thus, while this excursus is merely a rudimentary sketch, it should be noted that, at least in principle, a large region of Spinoza's thought depends upon insights external to the system.²⁷

Thus, as shown by this analysis, the theses advanced in the second part of the *Ethics* are arranged not simply by theme but also by *which premises are needed for which theoretical complexes*. Consequently, Spinoza's theory of the human mind can be divided according to the types of premises underlying each individual section: a section whose claims are based exclusively on the formal, foundational structures of the metaphysics is followed by a short passage that largely depends upon historical and phenomenological facts, the knowledge of which can be considered axiomatic. Only afterward does Spinoza deal with all those problems whose solution in some way or another requires specific knowledge from the natural sciences—knowledge that he lays out in the physical excursus without the intention of proving it conclusively and which, therefore, relies upon input from outside the system.

This way of distinguishing between different types of premises is of the utmost importance for the philosophical claims raised by Spinoza's theory of the human mind. Apparently, he implicitly assumes that this theory is composed of *various theoretical parts sui generis*, an assumption that indirectly denies that all knowledge about the human mind can be traced back to one single origin—be

to show that we can have only a very inadequate knowledge of the duration of our body. In contrast to other propositions dealing with the adequacy or inadequacy of an aspect of our knowledge, the objective here is not to provide an analysis of the ideas that we actually have but to show that our duration is by necessity indeterminate. 2p49, finally, is similar to 2p11 in that it deals with a conceptual problem, namely how to replace the concept of will with the notion of specific volitions.

27. The physical excursus is used in all five parts of the *Ethics*—albeit with declining frequency. The only extended section that no longer contains any direct references to the physics is the second half of the fifth part, where Spinoza deals with the problem of the eternity of the human mind. That does not imply, however, that the propositions in this section have no connection whatsoever to the physics; it just means that they do not directly refer to it.

it the concept of substance, the self-evidence of the Cartesian *cogito*, or our understanding of the way in which thinking beings are physically conditioned. This is based on an essentially compatibilist view: precisely because the various parts are different, not only thematically but also with regard to their premises, we can expect that apparent redundancies or contradictions can be resolved by precisely locating specific theorems within the system.

d) *Method: The Argumentative Claim behind the mos geometricus*

If we regard Spinoza's theory of the human mind as a theoretical complex that relies on *differentiation* and *complementarity* among its individual parts, we are also compelled to change our view of Spinoza's use of the geometric method. In the reception of Spinoza, scholars have frequently projected various interpretations onto his use of the geometric method, and his use of it continues to trigger discussion even today. Considered by some to be a sort of guideline for therapeutic reflection,²⁸ the *mos geometricus* strikes others as a strict and deductive method of proof,²⁹ which, at least in principle, is to be assessed in terms of whether all propositions truly follow from the definitions.³⁰ In both cases, the *Ethics* is often assumed to be a relatively self-contained work.³¹

28. Among those who favor this approach is Aaron Garrett 2003, 7, but following a similar direction is De Dijn 1986, 1994, and 1996. In my opinion, this approach does not fully explain the function of the geometric method. It may be true that certain philosophical methods promote therapeutic effects. Nonetheless, possible therapeutic functions of philosophical approaches do not directly depend on the method they are adopting. Another danger should be mentioned here: it has often been said that, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza develops a kind of conception of therapy. This much is true (Part IV, Chapter 14, footnote 37). What he does not do, however, is create specific norms for therapeutic practice—which has been noted explicitly by Rice 2003, 108. Rather, Spinoza develops the principles that enable us to regard a kind of therapy based on knowledge and the rational control of our affects as a plausible option.

29. See especially Gueroult 1968, 31–2, but also Joachim 1964, 9.

30. The system's self-sufficiency is also assumed by many reconstructions in an analytic vein, which use formal logic to test the proofs of individual propositions. Reconstructions of this kind have mostly focused on two problems: Spinoza's substance monism and his derivation of the concept of *conatus*. For the first, see especially Garrett 1979 and Della Rocca 2002; for the latter, see Naess 1975, Della Rocca 1996b, and Garrett 2002. Provided they arrive at positive results and do not simply accuse Spinoza's reflections of being implausible (as Bennett 1984 often does), these reconstructions cannot usually manage without assuming principles that Spinoza, while adhering to them, never makes explicit anywhere, one example being the principle of sufficient reason. While it is permissible, in my opinion, to take principles of this kind into consideration when interpreting, they should not be used to reconstruct proofs.

31. There also exist interpretations that consider the geometric method to be irrelevant, more or less neglecting it as a result. Wolfson 1934 has been known to take this position, as has Deleuze

In contrast, the observations made above—especially our thoughts regarding the status of physics—suggest that the geometric method, for Spinoza, is less *deductive* in nature than based on *systematic accumulation*. Its methodical aim is not to present a theoretically self-contained system; rather, it seeks to map out how specific problems are related to each other and thus to determine what kind of knowledge can legitimately be consulted to answer different kinds of questions. Viewing the geometric method in this way denies that the *Ethics* is theoretically self-contained, thus depriving it of its majestic strictness without weakening its claim to systematicity and stringency. To carefully consider the chronology of the text, for instance, remains important according to this view—not because every single thesis must derive seamlessly from the metaphysical parameters laid out in Part One but because the order and arrangement of the various propositions and groups of propositions systematically regulate the increase in premises, and thus regulate the increase in the theoretical and conceptual possibilities for differentiation. One instance in which it is helpful to view the geometric method in this manner is when dealing with the many contradictions that Spinoza is often accused of committing. We can assume that at least the most obvious discrepancies between individual theses can be explained by showing how later propositions tend to refine earlier claims by taking additional insights into consideration.³²

The interpretation of the geometric method I am advocating here is perhaps not novel in showing that some theorems are *theoretically interdependent*. Where its novelty lies is in showing that some theorems are *independent* of each other *in terms of argument*. For instance, it is not incidental to the composition of Spinoza's theory of the human mind that 2p7s maintains the identity of the mental and the physical regardless of whether or how exactly this is phenomenologically substantiated at a later point. Just as important is that Spinoza approaches the evaluative question concerning the adequacy or inadequacy of

1968 and 1988. Criticism of treating the geometric method either too laxly or too rigidly comes from Hecker 1977, as well as Schnepf 1996, 128 ff., and 2003, 47–8. Also instructive in this regard is Cramer's compelling refutation of all those interpretations that act as if everything was already decided by the definitions of Part One (1977).

32. Barker 1972, 103, cautions that the assumption of a growing potential for differentiation should not be treated too flexibly when he says, "It is a plain implication of the geometrical method that no later proposition can 'modify' any earlier one in the sense of correcting it and requiring it to be altered If we care to use the word 'modify' in the sense of 'substituting more precise statements for vaguer ones' . . . then, no doubt, later propositions may be said to modify earlier ones." It seems to me that Barker himself interprets the geometric method too rigidly, for instance, when he demands that certain concepts be fully defined once and for all. In my opinion, certain propositions comply with this demand, whereas others do not—which is not necessarily to the detriment of Spinoza's argument. See, e.g., my remarks about the concept of idea in Part II, Chapter 5.

our knowledge only on the basis of the physical–physiological claims made in the excursus following 2p13s, although—and this is crucial—the concept of truth itself had already been introduced in the axioms of the first part. Even if the textual development of Spinoza’s theory of the human mind does not follow a self-contained deductive chain, we can nonetheless assume that we are dealing with a highly composed—and, I think, highly refined—theoretical edifice.

Confirmation of this last point also comes from the economy of the text, which allows for certain questions to be discussed at length, whereas others barely receive any attention at all. There are topics that Spinoza touches upon only briefly, despite their being vital for his enterprise as a whole; topics carrying less argumentative weight, on the other hand, are sometimes discussed extensively. It stands to reason that there is a certain system behind this. Regarding the second part, two things are worth mentioning in this context. The first aspect that should be noted is how sketchily the physical–physiological excursus is drawn. In contrast to Cartesian physics, Spinoza does not explain, for instance, how exactly the various processes of regulation and perception do their work in the human body. He contents himself with naming general principles governing the constitution of individual bodies. Apparently, he does not attach much relevance to the physical details when it comes to a philosophical examination of human cognition. He considers it sufficient to put a few preliminary ideas at our disposal. Philosophically speaking, there is no harm in this: it is indeed possible to discuss the effect that the human body’s physical constitution has on our understanding of human cognition without fully grasping all of the physiological laws involved. Thus, it may just be the preliminary character of his physics that makes it possible for Spinoza’s view of the relationship between physical and epistemological laws to be of philosophical interest even beyond the specific historical context of his physical convictions.³³

Second, it is remarkable how sparingly Spinoza uses the axioms from the second part. That is especially significant if we assume that these axioms proclaim phenomenological facts (among other things)—as suggested above. Apparently, Spinoza believes that everybody would agree with these facts—their axiomatic status tells us as much. They are needed to explain what it is that characterizes people as individual subjects. It is all the more remarkable, then, that Spinoza no

33. This may also explain the current interest in Spinoza among neuroscientists. It is important, though, to avoid misconceptions: Spinoza’s concept of the human mind is no precursory notion to what Damasio calls “conscious mind” (2003, 184–5). What brings Spinoza close to contemporary neuroscience is his emphasis on the influence of the emotions on human thought, which is somewhat unusual in the philosophical tradition.

longer refers to these axioms in the course of his reflection on mental content. Apparently, they serve to elucidate only the concept, and not the content, of the human mind. Thus, if Spinoza cannot achieve the former without taking recourse to phenomenological facts, it does not mean that he practices phenomenology in today's sense.³⁴ On the contrary, he is highly distrustful of phenomenological reflections about the content of our mental states, as shown by his analyses of the genesis of meaning and of the phenomenal content of ideas in the context of his epistemology and his theory of affects.³⁵

Thus, we can generally conclude that the location and argumentative foundation of Spinoza's theses often matter just as much for establishing their precise content as for what is stated in them. Henceforth, a common task will therefore be to highlight the philosophical claims made in individual statements by carefully locating these statements within the theoretical structure. However, this is not merely an exegetical undertaking since it ultimately serves the purpose of theoretical reconstruction. I intend to show that Spinoza's theory of the human mind—although often presented in only a rudimentary form—can cope with the problem outlined above and that his approach enables us to conceive of experience—without depriving it of its subjective dimension—as something that can be explained, understood, and related to.

e) On the Structure of This Book

My approach here takes its cue from the three-stage partition outlined above. Spinoza's *Ethics* is something of a closed book for many readers—a book, no less, that has generated numerous, often merely semiaccurate stereotypes. Before I begin to reconstruct those three stages within the theory of the human mind, I would therefore like to open with a brief discussion of a few prerequisites that go along with Spinoza's systematic approach. Thus, the first part of my study will elucidate the parameters set by 1) Spinoza's general approach; 2) his concept of metaphysics, as I understand it; and 3) his physical understanding of the individual. However, since the theory and conception of the human mind are at the center of the book as a whole, I will not go fully into detail in the first part.

34. Harris 1995, 63–4, is among the very few who point to phenomenological considerations in Spinoza's philosophy of mind, although he attributes them too high a systematic weight, I think.

35. This corresponds with the observation that the conclusions drawn from the axioms of the second part are reduced to an absolute minimum—they are restricted to the very statement of the phenomenological facts contained in the axioms and to a few structural points. See also Part III, Chapter 10.

The second part is devoted to Spinoza's *ontology of the mental*, which is discussed mainly in the first seven propositions of the second part of the *Ethics*. What I assemble here is no self-contained theory but rather an explication of the premises whose validity must be assumed if Spinoza's rationalism, as envisioned by the metaphysics set out in Part One, were to become a fruitful source for explanations of mental phenomena. These premises belong to completely different levels. In addition to the question to what extent Spinoza's theory of mind depends upon his metaphysics, I include Spinoza's concept of idea, which, after being introduced in 2def3, is established as a basic concept of his philosophy of mind in 2ax3. Moreover, the first few propositions allow us to identify two theorems that are important for the entire approach to the human mind: the assumption that being is universally intelligible (developed in the first four propositions) and the so-called identity theory of the mental and the physical (advanced in 2p7s, in connection with the preceding propositions).

The subject of the third part is the actual *pièce de résistance* of Spinoza's theory of the human mind—the passage from 2p8 to 2p13s, in which he gives reasons for identifying the human mind with the idea of the body, among other things. A close reading of this passage will show that this concept of mind does not so much serve the purpose of determining the ontological relationship between body and mind but that it is based on a discussion of the subject-theoretical prerequisites for the individuality of human minds. Thus, my reconstruction dispels the widely held notion that Spinoza makes the individual subject disappear. One must rather assume that it is precisely the problem of the numerical difference between subjects that Spinoza tries to solve with his definition of the human mind.

A brief excursus between the third and the fourth parts deals with the issue of the function of physics. To what end, we may ask, does Spinoza insert a theoretical sketch about physics in the middle of his theory of the human mind, and why does he choose to do so at that precise location? As I will show, these two questions can be resolved by assuming that it provides physical and natural philosophical knowledge that allows us to adopt an external perspective on our own thoughts. Later applications of propositions from this excursus further suggest that Spinoza needs this kind of external perspective for two reasons: first, in order to maintain that experience is explainable including its determinate contents and, second, in order to lend credibility to his epistemology.

The key issue of the fourth part, which focuses on Spinoza's psychology and epistemology, is the particular contents of our experience. Spinoza's remarks on psychology, in particular, are directly associated with the problem of how experience can be explained. The psychology of cognition, which Spinoza develops in the course of his theory of imagination, tackles the question of how content is

generated. The theory of affect, on the other hand, contributes in an illuminating fashion to two related questions: why are certain events or thoughts experienced as either pleasant or unpleasant, and why is it that all subjects do not experience the same events as pleasant or unpleasant? It turns out that these two parts of Spinoza's psychological theory, while spelling out the laws according to which experiential content is determined, also reveal the causes behind the sometimes drastic differences in how individuals experience certain events. In addition, the fourth part pursues the question of how successful explanation of experience is possible. To do this, we must first explain what it means for ideas to be true or adequate and, second, explain to what extent humans can have adequate ideas about their experiences. I will show that Spinoza's epistemology generally supports the rationalist view that experience—including its subjective dimension—can be explained, without thereby trivializing the option of a fully successful explanation.

A brief outlook on Spinoza's practical philosophy will complete the picture. The outlook's objective is to show which dimensions of a theory of the good life can be developed on the basis of successful—or even merely partially successful—explanations of experience. I will not give a detailed account of the argumentative problems that Spinoza's ethics may run into. Rather, I intend to highlight the exact ways in which his practical philosophy can be connected to his theory of the human mind. For even if his conception of ethics may not fully convince us anymore, after Kant, his concrete insights in this regard are always surprisingly astute and, at the same time, wise and humane in a liberating manner.

PART I

The Basic Framework

The *Ethics*' Systematic Premises

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Dissociating the Concept of Substance from the Concept of Subject

WITH INNOVATIVE PHILOSOPHICAL approaches, we often find that the history of their reception produces an image that is a reflection not so much of their actual insights but rather of the erroneous stereotypes created by their critics. The reception of Spinoza's philosophy is a veritable textbook case. Within a few short years following the publication of the *Opera posthuma*, the philosophical approach attributed to him was denounced as a monstrosity. "Quel monstre, Ariste, quelle épouvantable et ridicule chimère!" exclaims Théodore in Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*—an invective against Spinoza that shortly after will be used extensively by Pierre Bayle.¹ Even though the name of Spinoza no longer contains the thrill of horror, he is still placed in the curiosity cabinet of the history of philosophy, rather than being counted among those great thinkers from whom we can still learn something of value. His name remains surrounded by a certain aura of absurdity. Even philosophers who are deeply sympathetic to him tend to see his approach as something almost exotic—as something fascinating, at least in part, for its strangeness.²

In Spinoza's case, it would be too easy to give a purely historical explanation for the cliché of monstrosity. No doubt, historical factors and interests had their fair share in creating Spinoza's scandalous image.³ We must nonetheless assume that the objections that have led to the "monstrosity" accusation are as decisive

1. Malebranche 1979 II, 826; Bayle 1982, 1069–70. For the frequent occurrence of monster metaphors in early modern scientific debates, see Daston and Park 1998, as well as Hagner 1995.

2. See, e.g., Schütt 1985, 182f., or Della Rocca 1996b, vii.

3. See, e.g., Scheur recte Sonne 1925 for the desire to turn Spinoza into a specifically Jewish philosopher.

as they are precarious. The horror felt even by a polymath such as Leibniz, who was clearly fascinated by Spinoza, indicates that for many thinkers—even enlightened ones—a lot was at stake here.⁴ The issues that caused concern were not only related to Spinoza's views on religion but also to the systematic foundations of the *Ethics*. In this section, I would therefore like to take a closer look at some of the points underlying the “monstrosity” complaint. I will proceed from a view of Spinozism which, aside from greatly shaping the later reception of Spinoza,⁵ also expresses the systematic key issue better than any other: the Spinoza article in Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*.

Bayle's article focuses on two objections: the first is logical, while the other arises from the concept of subject, or its application to God. According to the first criticism, Spinoza's system leads to a situation in which contradictory predicates are ascribed to God. If it were true that humans are modalities of God, Bayle argues, then it would be a mistake to say about Peter that he denies one thing, wants another, and affirms a third—for according to Spinoza's system, it would always be God who denies, wants, or affirms something, such that all particularities resulting from human thought actually fall back on God's substance. That, Bayle concludes, ultimately amounts to ascribing contradictory predicates to God, which would violate the principles of metaphysics—specifically, the law of noncontradiction.⁶

Secondly, Spinoza is accused of creating a system in which God appears as the author of contradictory actions. Bayle apparently thinks this objection is even more scandalous than the first, although it largely depends on the criticism outlined above. For him, this second aspect virtually represents

4. For Leibniz's ambivalence vis-à-vis Spinoza, see also Goldenbaum 2001, although she focuses on Leibniz's reception of the TTP. In my opinion, the same ambivalence can also be shown in his reception of the *Ethics*, given that Leibniz anticipates Bayle's objections in the notes he took during his visit to The Hague.

5. Bayle's influence is particularly emphasized by Vernière 1954, 328–9, and Moreau 1996a, 413. As Vernière points out, Bayle's attitude toward Spinoza is primarily marked by ambivalence (1954, 293–4).

6. See Bayle 1982, I/2, 1077: “S'il étoit donc vrai, comme le prétend Spinoza, que les hommes fussent des modalités de Dieu, on parlerait fausement quand on diroit, Pierre nie ceci, il veut cela, il affirme une telle chose; car réellement & d'effet, selon ce Système, c'est Dieu qui nie, qui veut, qui affirme, & par conséquent toutes les dénominations, qui résultent des pensées de tous les hommes, tombent proprement & physiquement sur la substance de Dieu . . . Passons plus avant; les termes contradictoires, vouloir & ne vouloir pas, conviennent selon toutes ces conditions en même temps à différent hommes; il faut donc que dans le Système de Spinoza ils conviennent à cette substance unique & invisible qu'il nomme Dieu. C'est donc Dieu qui en même temps forme l'acte de vouloir, & qui ne le forme pas à l'égard d'un même objet. On vérifie donc de lui deux termes contradictoires, ce qui est le renversement des premiers principes de la Métaphysique.”

the pinnacle of philosophical monstrosity. The bone of contention is that Spinoza, as Bayle understands him, casts doubt on our intuitive grasp of individual humans as numerically different subjects. For Bayle, to question that intuition would cost too much. Human beings hating each other, killing each other, forming armies in order to wage war on each other, the winners eating the losers—all that strikes Bayle as comprehensible just because numerically different people are involved and because the distinction between “mine” and “yours” creates different passions in us. But the thought that humans are merely modifications of one and the same entity and that it is thus God himself who acts and transforms himself into warring Turks and Hungarians—that would surpass even the worst monsters and chimeras ever conjured up by the most deranged of minds.⁷

These two objections contain some validity. If Spinoza really were to be read in such a way that he would either attribute directly contradictory predicates to the same logical subject or that he would install a single divine subject (of action as well as consciousness) as the author of contradictory actions or as the bearer of inconsistent propositional attitudes, then, and only then, would his philosophy indeed belong in the cabinet of curiosities. We can adapt the law of noncontradiction in such a way as to assume that an object cannot be accorded or denied the same predicate at the same time, in the same respect, by the same person—but we cannot abandon it without comment. We can, of course, relativize the intuition that different people are different subjects. For instance, we can say about actions committed by entire groups that the group is the subject of the action. Likewise, we can attribute certain belief systems to an entire collective, perhaps even without attributing them to every single member of the collective. But even though the idea of subject used in these claims is a merely functional concept which abandons any notion of ontologically grounded boundaries between subjects, we still have to assume some numerical differences between subjects.⁸ The assumption that there is only one single subject, on the other hand, renders

7. See Bayle 1982, 1077: “Que les hommes se haïssent les uns les autres, qu’ils s’entr’assassinent au coin d’un bois, qu’ils s’assemblent en corps d’armées pour s’entre-tuer, que les vainqueurs mangent quelquefois les vaincus; cela se comprend, parce qu’on suppose qu’ils sont distincts les uns des autres, et que le tien et le mien produisent en eux des passions contraires. Mais que les hommes n’étant que la modification du même être, n’y ayant par conséquent que Dieu qui agisse, et le même Dieu en nombre qui se modifie en Turc, se modifiant en Hongrois, il y ait des guerres et des batailles c’est ce qui surpasse tous les monstres, et tous les dérèglements chimériques des plus folles têtes qu’on ait jamais enfermées dans les petits maisons.”

8. In Chapters 8 and 9 of Part III, I will give a more in-depth discussion of Spinoza’s treatment of the numerical difference between subjects. But see also Part I, Chapter 3, § c, where I analyze Spinoza’s concept of the individual and its applicability to collectives.

inconceivable even the notion of collective subjects as it dissolves any numerical difference between subjects of any kind.

The absurdity of these consequences can, of course, just as well be turned against Bayle's hermeneutics as against Spinoza's system. The more we realize how severe these objections actually are, the more unlikely it seems that Bayle actually wanted to do justice to Spinoza's approach. We must conclude that the object of Bayle's denunciation, that monster called Spinozism, is primarily the product of his own polemics. Moreover, by raising the specter of monopsychism, Bayle employs a *topos* that had already proved its effectiveness in other contexts—if by “effectiveness” we mean the ability to polarize and discredit.⁹

Still, it is worth taking a moment to think further about Bayle and his image of Spinoza as the creator of a monstrous philosophy. By engaging with this image, we gain a good understanding of the criteria that any reconstruction must meet if it wants to take Spinoza's answers to certain questions seriously. Regardless of whether it agrees or disagrees with these answers, any serious reconstruction must first and foremost assume that Spinoza's distinction between substance and mode has nothing to do with the grammatical distinction between subject and predicate.¹⁰ And, looking closely, there is barely any evidence to suggest that it should. In contrast to Leibniz, whose notes on Spinoza's *Ethics* sometimes refer to the ontological concept of substance as *subjectum* and who defines modes as a non-necessary predicates,¹¹ Spinoza himself never uses the term “substance” to denote the ontological equivalent of the logical subject of a predication. As Brunschvicg stated over a century ago, it requires an “*incompréhension volontaire*,” a voluntary misreading, to interpret Spinoza's ontological terminology along these lines.¹²

9. In this context, see Moreau 1994a, 414. When it comes to analyzing Spinoza's attitude toward the question of monopsychism, sufficient attention is rarely paid to the way in which the pejorative charge of Spinozism actually revisits the charge of Averroism. This is telling for two reasons: first of all, it lends both systematicity and perfidy to the strategies adopted by early critics of Spinoza; second, we must assume that Spinoza was familiar with these allegations and, anticipating them, preemptively reacted to them in his *Ethics*. How that works in detail will become obvious in Part III, during our discussion of the concept of mind.

10. This point is also made in Carriero's (1995, 262–3) critique of Bayle. But Carriero keeps insisting that the relationship between substance and mode remains indebted to the Aristotelian relation between substance and accidents—a problematic assumption, as we will see in the next chapter.

11. See the appendix to Bouveresse 1992, 282.

12. Brunschvicg 1904, 783: “En particulier l'article sur Spinoza est un modèle d'incompréhension volontaire. Nous admettons bien qu'il prouve que le substantialisme de Spinoza est contradictoire avec le substantialisme de la Scolastique, mais non que l'un ou l'autre soi contradictoire en soi.” But see also Popkin (1979, 247), who counters that opinion by cautioning that “Bayle was not one to purposely misread his opponents.”

In addition, a systematically fruitful reconstruction will have to assume that Spinoza regards singular men as numerically different subjects and that his approach therefore has little in common with the distorted picture of Spinozism as a system that views God as the only true subject of all human action, thought, and emotion.¹³ This point is especially crucial for the doctrine of affects, and thus for the latter parts of the *Ethics*. We have to assume that emotions belong to individuals in an irreducible and particular way. This holds true even if we agree with Spinoza in considering groups—and not just singular people—as individuals and if we further concede that certain emotions are largely acquired through mimetic mechanisms. Paradoxically, Bayle's demand that we be able to explain the origin of warfare on the basis of conflicting passions among different subjects comes very close to the central claim made by Spinoza himself in his theory of affects. In the preface to the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza expresses his desire to understand (*intelligere*) affects, instead of deriding or condemning them. Thus, he demands exactly the same from human emotions as Bayle, namely that they be regarded as explainable even in their more abstruse forms and consequences—and do wars not qualify as such?¹⁴ Spinoza largely follows through with this demand. Outside of his theory of affects, developed in the third part of the *Ethics*, there is likely no other early modern theory of human emotions that could better elucidate the origins of hatred, prejudice, and other unfriendly emotions that pit individuals against other people or collectives. Not only does he show how affects arise in individuals, but reflection on the intersubjective and thus political dimension inherent in the problem of affects is constantly present in his work. Still, Bayle is certainly right when he says that to deny any numerical difference between subjects would mean relinquishing any coherent explanation for why one person thinks, feels, or acts so differently from another.

We can therefore draw the following conclusion: if we want to do justice to Spinoza's account—something that his critics during the early Enlightenment were unwilling to do—then we must somehow provide a reconstruction that does not rely on a conception of God as the only true subject of all action, thought, and emotion.

Many readers of Spinoza, including experts, may wonder: What does the *Ethics* have to offer that would allow us to counter Bayle's objection? Is it not precisely this radical denial of plurality that lies at the center of Spinoza's philosophy? Can we really dissociate his thought from this crucial idea? We can—provided we no longer think of the *Ethics* as a system that reduces human subjects

13. For more on this, see Part III, Chapter 1.

14. See also Renz 2005, 338, as well as Part IV, Chapter 2.

to the one divine substance. We must realize, instead, that it is based on the tacit decision to divest the concept of substance from any association with the concept of subject, a decision that allows Spinoza, in turn, to conceive of humans as subjects without according them the quality of substance. In other words, Spinoza's approach proceeds from a radical *dissociation of the concept of substance from the concept of subject*.

While there is never any explicit acknowledgment of this dissociation, our current reconstruction will show in detail how its oblique influence can be felt on very different levels. That said, we can already point to its most important implications. Firstly, it has consequences for Spinoza's conceptual terminology: it is not the case that the substance is a subject, nor is it true that those things that we can interpret as epistemic subjects or subjects of action qualify as substances. Secondly, this dissociation has important consequences for the theoretical structure of the *Ethics*. As will be discussed in detail, the concepts of substance and subject are separate theoretical objects, requiring different treatments—although the theory of the human mind and, by extension, the notion of human subjectivity certainly derive from the metaphysics. Finally, this dissociation also provides support for the fundamentally anti-anthropomorphic thrust of the *Ethics*: anyone seeking to establish a philosophy in which God is barred from acting teleologically cannot simply, on a more abstract level, conceive of God as a being endowed with subjectivity.

Thus, to dissociate the concept of substance from the concept of subject is the crucial decision from which the *Ethics* departs. It is this decision that turns the constitution of human subjectivity into an issue worth exploring. Since there is no element of subjectivity within the substance (i.e., self-evident being), we must find some other way to explain why human beings are subjects and why, in their status as subjects, they are the way they are. That is indeed a radical step—one that distinguishes Spinoza's approach from many others. What most other philosophers before and after him seek to connect—substantiality, self-causation, and spontaneity, on the one hand, and being-a-subject, on the other—Spinoza separates right from the start. With this, he sets a course that has fundamental implications for a number of specific issues. To miss this crucial point—and we can assume that Bayle and many of his successors miss it more or less intentionally—can easily lead to seeing monstrosities everywhere. On the other hand, considering this decision carefully and with due diligence can show us that Spinoza's philosophy, despite taking an unusual approach, is not as absurd as it may appear at first glance. In what follows, I am going to show how Spinoza's ontological terminology should be understood if we want to spare ourselves a visit to the cabinet of curiosities.

The Conception of Metaphysics in de Deo and Its Implications

IN THE *ETHICS*, Spinoza distinguishes between two kinds of being, which he calls “substance” and “mode.” He introduces these terms in the third and fifth definitions of Part One. According to these definitions, a substance is a thing (*res*) that is in itself and is conceived through itself; a mode, on the other hand, is a thing that exists in, and is conceived through, something other than itself.

According to 1ax1, this distinction can be applied to everything there is: clearly harking back to 1def3 and 1def5, the axiom states that “[w]hatever is, is either in itself or in another.”¹ As it later becomes clear—through 1p15 and 2p10²—this distinction is also fundamental to the conception of humans and human minds. Since they are not substances, human beings and minds must be conceived as modes or modifications of God’s attributes. For purposes of reconstructing the theory of the human mind, this raises the question of what exactly it means for something to be a mode. In this context, special effort must be made to understand how a term that means *state*, *manner*, or *measure of quality* can refer to entities that we are used to regarding as *bearers* of states or qualities, rather than instantiations of these properties.

Generally speaking, there are various options for addressing this problem. A quick glance at the secondary literature confirms as much. We can roughly distinguish between two general tendencies when it comes to interpreting the relationship between substance and mode. Proponents of the first tendency focus on the relation between the substance and its modes. Their implicit

1. “Omnia, quae sunt, vel in se, vel in alio sunt” (G II, 46; C I, 409).

2. 1p15 states that whatever is is in God and cannot be conceived without God; 2p10 and 2p10c maintain that the essence of a human is constituted by certain modifications of God’s attributes. See G II, 56 and 92–3; C I 420 and 453.

assumption goes something like this: if we could only understand what kind of relationship there is between the one substance and its modes, then we can also deduce what it means that concrete things, such as humans or human minds, are made of modes. Seeking to provide a historical model for this terminology, those who advocate this course of action often invoke the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident. Thus, the substance is considered a substratum in which certain accidents inhere. The modes, so these interpreters say, largely correspond to the accidents, and the relationship between the substance and its modes must primarily be conceived in terms of the latter's inherence in the former.³

Representatives of the second kind of interpretation approach these terms very differently from the outset. Their approach is partly motivated by a slightly more differentiated view of history. According to them, Spinoza's concepts of substance and mode derive from a radicalized version of the late scholastic debate surrounding the ontological implications of conceptual distinctions.⁴ On this understanding, modes are those entities that, like accidents, are not independent but exist in something else—despite which, they must nonetheless be accorded a certain degree of reality (something that stands in marked contrast to the nominalist criticism of accidents).⁵

Thus, this second view differs from the first in that its adherents refrain from interpreting Spinoza's distinction between substance and mode simply as a somewhat peculiar revival of Aristotelian thought. Instead, they assume that the concept of mode is intended as a reaction to nominalist reservations about the reality of accidents.⁶ Moreover, their focus is not on the relation between substance and mode but on the related issue of the ontological status of entities.

It is not immediately clear which of the two interpretive tendencies follows the right path. The first approach has the systematic advantage of arriving at unequivocal, albeit counterintuitive, conclusions regarding Spinoza's views on what constitutes a mode. Its representatives mostly maintain that modes must be conceived as properties of the divine substance, as suggested by the Aristotelian

3. Among those interpreting the substance–mode relation in this manner are De Dijn 1978, Carriero 1995, Alquié 1981, and Melamed 2004 and 2013. Possible sources have also been mentioned by Wolfson 1934 I, 61 ff., although he himself does not hold this position. The *locus classicus* is Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire*: see the previous chapter.

4. Hartbecke 2008 and Schnepf 1996 in particular place Spinoza's concept of mode in this context.

5. See especially Suárez 1866, VII, s. I, 16–20.

6. Hartbecke 2008.

distinction between “substance” and “accident.”⁷ This violates our ordinary intuitions since the *Ethics* also includes among the modes such objects as individual bodies, geometrical figures, and humans—objects that we would normally consider bearers of properties in their own right. That, however, does not in and by itself rule out that Spinoza really wanted to propose the very strange thesis that humans, houses, and mountains are merely properties of God.⁸ It is harder to defend this interpretation against historical objections. It is implausible that Spinoza should employ Aristotle’s distinction between substance and accident, even more so as he reiterates the nominalist criticism of accidents in his *Cogitata Metaphysica*, where in analogy to Descartes he actually *replaces* the distinction between substance and accident with that between substance and mode. We must therefore assume that he was familiar with the debate surrounding the reality of accidents and modes and that his idiosyncratic terminology is already a reaction to that debate.

With that, it also becomes clear how the second interpretive direction is superior to the first. Historically, it has the advantage of being able to place the *Ethics*’ ontological terminology into a relatively concrete discursive context, a context that is certain to have influenced Spinoza to at least some extent. As is well known, the problem surrounding the degree of reality of rational distinctions, still a point of contention within seventeenth-century scholasticism, was of crucial importance for Descartes. Many of Descartes’ ontological tenets about the human mind, from his substance dualism to his distinction between the *res cogitans* and its states, reflect the conceptual parameters of this debate.⁹ Spinoza, too, refers to these parameters in his argument for substance monism, for his part radicalizing Descartes’ ontological conceptualization against the backdrop of the debate.¹⁰

On the other hand, those who follow the second interpretation have trouble explaining what Spinoza’s modes actually are. Beginning with Gilles Deleuze, who read Spinoza within the context of the Scotist tradition, many

7. See Carriero 1995, 255; Alquié 1981, 106; and Melamed 2004, 65. Bennett’s field metaphysic operates with this model as well; see Bennett 1984, 93, and Esfeld 1995, 76–7.

8. As Carriero 1995 has shown, this thesis can be framed in such a way as to dodge, at least potentially, Bayle’s monstrosity charge. The alleged absurdity of Spinoza’s view can be avoided by distinguishing the Aristotelian subject–predicate relation from the subject–accident relation. Furthermore, the subject–accident relation can then be conceived as a relationship between a *causa materialis* and its effects. I find this strategy problematic insofar as Spinoza himself clearly conceives of the substance as a *causa efficiens*.

9. See the pertinent paragraphs 61–65 in the first part of the *Principia Philosophiae*, AT VIII, 28–32.

10. See Curley 1988, 9–15; Glauser 2004, 174–5; and Hartbecke 2008, 16–17.

reconstructions have alluded to degrees of being or power.¹¹ Alternatively, we can also call them “degrees of intensity,” which allows us to reserve judgment about whether or not Spinoza proposed what is sometimes called a “metaphysics of power.” This description is illuminating in that it articulates a twofold fact, namely that modes must be conceived of as dependent on something else while also possessing a certain reality themselves.¹² But this does not solve the problem, poignantly expressed by Curley, that Spinoza’s modes are “of the wrong logical type” to relate to the substance in the same way as Descartes’ modes.¹³ It is true that describing modes as degrees of intensity allows us to find common conceptual ground for such different degrees of being and power as those belonging to humans, trees, mountains, or stones—but how are we to think of these objects themselves *as* degrees of intensity belonging to something else? In light of this difficulty, which stems from the individual objects themselves being deemed to be modes of God’s attributes, it matters little whether we compare modes to the squareness of tabletops or to the warmth emanating from radiators. Both appear equally absurd.

Any systematic reconstruction must have an answer to this difficulty. To find one, I believe we need to combine the two interpretive approaches outlined above. On the one hand, we must assume that Spinoza’s ontological vocabulary does indeed result from an effort to radicalize Descartes’ terminology against the backdrop of the late scholastic discussions of distinctions. On the other hand, we must also assume that it was not Spinoza’s intention, in the *Ethics*, to discuss the ontological implications of the inherited types of conceptual distinctions but rather to establish a categorical difference between two types of objects, a difference that he also wanted to buttress by means of a fundamental ontology—that is, a theory of being as being. The purpose behind the alleged dependency of the modes on something else would simply be to account for the categorical difference between these two types of objects and not to describe the relationships between modes and other entities, including the one substance.

In the following, I provide a broad outline of such an interpretation. First, I explain the precise theoretical agenda behind Spinoza’s metaphysics (a). Then, I spell out how his argument for substance monism must be understood in this

11. Deleuze 1968, 173–4; Kisser 1998, 61–2.

12. See Schnepf 1996, 210–11. By analyzing the reasons behind Spinoza’s rejection of the substance–accident distinction, Schnepf shows that modes can, at least in some respects, be considered *ens reale*—in contrast to accidents, which are criticized for being nothing but *modi cogitandi*. Schnepf, however, does not opt for an interpretation along the lines of Deleuze’s theory of power.

13. Curley 1969, 18.

context (b). In two further steps, I discuss the function behind the distinction between substance and mode in a little more detail (c) and then briefly illustrate how that helps us comprehend Spinoza's doctrine of causality (d). Finally, I address the question, so crucial for the theory of mind, of what it means that humans are modes (e). All these remarks remain rudimentary as they are nothing but preliminaries to the reconstruction of Spinoza's theory of the human mind that follows. They are not intended to be the final word on Spinoza's metaphysics.

a) The Claim behind de Deo: Metaphysics as a General Ontology

Any serious discussion of the first part of the *Ethics* requires an understanding of the idea of metaphysics suggested in those pages. We should approach this part assuming that it combines a general ontology with a rational theology. But the fundamental question arises: what exactly is the subject matter of the resulting theory? Is Spinoza's metaphysics, as the title *de Deo* suggests, a doctrine of God, or is it a doctrine of being, in a sense yet to be determined?

Despite the title, the latter seems more plausible once we place Spinoza's terminology into the context of the late scholastic discussions of distinctions. This debate arises from the view that metaphysics is not a theory of the first principle but a theory of being as being.¹⁴ There are also several details that suggest an ontological interpretation. For the most part, the book features the word *res*, rather than "God."¹⁵ Only after 1p14, and thus after the proof that God is identical to the one substance, does the term "God" occasionally appear in the subject position of individual propositions. In addition, the whole deductive chain leading to substance monism contains only one single proposition, 1p11, that truly operates with the notion of God.¹⁶ This proposition fulfills a crucial role within the proof

14. For the debate surrounding the metaphysics conception in Arabic philosophy, see Schulthess and Imbach 1996, 173 ff.; for the development of this debate during the late scholastic period, especially in Suárez, see Courtine 1990, 379 ff.; for the place held by Spinoza's metaphysics within that tradition, see Schnepf 1996, 87. Walther 1971 also reads Spinoza's *Ethics* as an ontology. He does not, however, contextualize it historically by pointing to the ontology debate of the seventeenth century but rather understands it as an antitheological philosophy of religion that operates ontologically.

15. Again, see Schnepf 1996, 163–9.

16. 1p11 simply restates, in this terminology, the ontological argument for the existence of God. From this, Delbos 1908 concludes that Spinoza's whole system emerges from the notion of God, rather than the notion of the one substance. Yet, this interpretation presupposes that the definitions already contain the entire ontology, a view that I cannot share. See the Introduction, § d.

of substance monism conducted in 1p14. Spinoza could not prove the existence of a singular substance had he not previously shown that God could be viewed as a substance with infinitely many attributes.¹⁷ While this lends some argumentative weight to the notion of God and the underlying tradition of proving God's existence, it actually suggests that Spinoza's interest was chiefly an ontological one. We can therefore assume that the aforementioned combination of a general ontology, and a rational theology primarily represents an attempt to reduce theological problems to an ontological plane.¹⁸ That does not rule out any *deification of being* that may occur in the process. One embodiment of such a deification of being is the identification, in 2def7, of *realitas* and *perfectio*.¹⁹ Nonetheless, I think that in most, if not all, cases in which Spinoza takes recourse to theological topoi, ontological questions are at stake.

The assumption that Spinoza's metaphysics is really a general ontology has significant consequences for the reconstruction of his argument. When it comes to identifying Spinoza's tenets, we will have to proceed from the hypothesis that whenever he mentions God, he actually has features of being in mind and not properties of God—certainly not a personal God in the theistic sense. Wherever possible, we must therefore translate theological statements into ontological ones. As will be evident from a number of passages, this occasionally requires a considerable interpretive effort. It is not always obvious which ontological thesis underlies an apparently theological statement. Besides, in the demonstrations in particular, Spinoza sometimes uses the notion of God in a way that is difficult to translate into a purely ontological argument without any loss in meaning. Nevertheless, a closer look at many of these passages reveals that, even in places

17. For the importance of the notion of God for Spinoza's substance monism, see also Cramer 1977; for its theological roots, see Carriero 1994.

18. Mason 1997, 35, has argued against this thesis, but he uses a rationale that I cannot follow. According to Mason, Spinoza's approach has the tendency to transfer the ontology—i.e., the inquiry into what exists—from the realm of philosophy into the realm of physics. This assumption has a grain of truth in it. It is true that in the physical digression, Spinoza addresses questions that we would today consider ontological in nature, for instance, the question under which conditions a body is identical with itself over time. Yet, this does not mean that Spinoza would therefore think of these questions as no longer falling under the purview of philosophical discourse. In the seventeenth century, physics was still part of philosophy, and even the *libertas philosophandi* postulated by Spinoza in his TTP consists partly in the freedom to practice the natural sciences regardless of theological doctrine. Also, it is in the first part of the *Ethics* that Spinoza justifies his view that physics can answer ontological questions, which means that it has its systematic moorings in his metaphysics. As will be shown later, a general ontological reading of the first part will be able to explain these ties much better than a theological interpretation.

19. See 2def6: "By reality and perfection I mean the same thing" ("Per realitatem et perfectio idem intelligo") (C I 447; G II, 85).

where his argument features theological topoi, Spinoza is actually seeking to address ontological questions.²⁰

In the next three sections, I sketch my views on a few of the themes that Spinoza discusses in the second part of *de Deo*. My goal in doing so is not to explore them in detail but merely to propose a way in which certain Spinozistic points could be read within an ontological framework—all the while avoiding the difficulties raised by Bayle against his own pantheistic interpretation of Spinoza.

b) Substance Monism as a Commitment to Realism

As we attribute a general-ontological concept of metaphysics to Spinoza, we must figure out the purpose behind the substance monism championed in 1p14, a position systematically developed during the first half of Part One. Ontologically speaking, what exactly does it mean that there can only be one single substance?²¹

It is sometimes claimed that Spinoza's substance monism primarily serves to overcome the Cartesian dualism between body and mind.²² This assessment clearly falls short of the mark. Granted, the doctrine of substance monism *also* has the effect of revising the relationship between body and mind as envisioned by Descartes. But that is not the only, nor even the primary, objective that Spinoza is after when he insists that there is only one single substance. The overall structure of the *Ethics* reveals that the doctrine of substance monism is also, independently, an indispensable building block for Spinoza's theory of causality as well as for his epistemology, both of which are just as relevant for the later parts as the thesis that body and mind are ontologically identical. Thus, if we want to understand the crux behind the idea that there can only be

20. It is not the first but the fifth part that showcases the limits of this kind of general ontological reconstruction. In 5p35 and 5p36, we encounter a theorem that cannot simply be reduced to ontological assertions: the *amor Dei intellectualis*. That does not really constitute an objection to interpreting Spinoza's metaphysics as a theory of being, for that issue has no bearing on Spinoza's assumption, laid out in 5p22 and 5p23, that the human mind is eternal. Moreover, this assumption can actually be approached from an epistemological perspective, as shown by Allison 1987, 171 ff.; Moreau 1994a, 539–49; and Nadler 2001, 115 ff., and 2006, 266 ff. The same does not hold for the *amor Dei intellectualis*. Also see the final pages of the present work.

21. Regarding substance monism, we must distinguish between its argumentative foundation, on the one hand, and its purpose, on the other. The issue of foundation is not under consideration here; instead, see Cramer 1977, Garrett 1979, Della Rocca 2002, and Glauser 2004. When it comes to the argumentative foundation, analytic philosophers tend to be more innovative than philologists and practitioners of hermeneutics who take contexts of debate into account; with the issue of purpose, it is usually the other way around.

22. See Brunschvicg 1904, Garrett 1979, and Della Rocca 1996b and 2002.

one substance, we must try to find a common point of origin for these three theoretical parts at least.

We may uncover such a point of origin by asking ourselves which ontological reasons may have led Spinoza to reject the idea of a transcendent creator. To be sure, his intention was not simply to criticize theology. It is rather more likely that Spinoza takes issue with the idea of a transcendent creator chiefly because it is rather difficult to reconcile with the position, which he held right from the beginning, that only intelligible objects are endowed with being.²³ Positing the existence of a *transcendent* creator (in opposition to an immanent cause) ultimately means rejecting that *all* being is intelligible. This would leave us with two choices: either we limit the rationalist claim of intelligibility to specific areas of being, just as Descartes did,²⁴ or we have to accept that the notion of intelligibility itself is watered down, as can occasionally be observed in the scholastics of the seventeenth century.²⁵ We can therefore presume that Spinoza's substance monism is meant as a reaction to this twofold danger of either limiting or weakening the claim of rationalism. Whether this is an effective strategy is debatable. What cannot be a matter of dispute is Spinoza's assertion that there can only be one intelligible reality and that everything in existence must somehow be part of this single reality. In that sense, the doctrine of substance monism is indeed fundamental for everything that follows, even though it is not limited to any specific function. It serves to create a clear understanding of what it means that entities are endowed with *realitas* and how this *realitas* is established—a term, by the way, that in the context of late scholastic ontology does not simply denote the mere fact of something's existence but also its disposition to exist.²⁶ This understanding then informs a number of subsequent discussions, notably those pertaining to the problem of causality, the relationship between body and mind, and the human capacity for knowledge.

That Spinoza acknowledges only a single self-subsistent being, which he also takes to be all-encompassing, thus simply means that there is only one universe wherein everything is connected with everything and which alone

23. This claim is discussed primarily at the beginning of CM; see G I, 233 ff.; C I 299.

24. See Renz 2009b, 36.

25. For the use of the notions *res* and *ens* among the scholastics, see Courtine 1992, 897 ff.

26. See the entries on *ens* and *res* in Goelenius' *Lexicon philosophicum* (152–3 and 983–4). Those *res* that are *in intellectu* are counted among the *entia realia* as well. The criteria for ascribing *realitas* to a *res* are consistency and intelligibility. In other words, what is at stake in ascribing *realitas* to a *res* is that the possibility of existence can be apprehended. (See also Courtine 1990, 379. Following Wolter, Courtine uses the word “existibles” in this context.)

is endowed with absolute reality or an unconditional disposition to exist—whereas all entities involved therein derive their reality from this universal connectedness. It is this idea—that the only thing capable of absolute existence is the universal, reality-inducing connectedness of everything with everything else—that 1) underlies Spinoza’s theory of causality, 2) eliminates any ontological dualism between body and mind, and 3) ensures, as an ontological requirement, that Spinoza’s epistemology can ultimately be committed to an epistemological realism.

c) On the Categorical Difference between Substance and Mode

Our assumption that *de Deo* is beholden to a general-ontological conception of metaphysics also has ramifications for the opposition of substance and mode, for it can be ruled out, on the basis of this assumption, that these two terms simply act as ontological names for phenomena that are theological in origin. Substance and mode are not terminological equivalents for a theistic God and his creatures. To understand their actual meaning, one must take a closer look at their theoretical function in the first half of Part One.

The following observations, for example, are particularly instructive. First, there is the hesitation the text displays toward determining, once and for all, what “substance” and “mode” actually denote. Not until 1p11 are we told that the term “substance” can be applied to God, and only in 1p14 do we learn that it refers exclusively to God. Starting with 1p15s, we can finally surmise that “modes” may denote individual things, but not until 1p25c is this explicitly confirmed. Apparently, Spinoza initially has no intention for “substance” and “mode” to indicate anything specific. Second, we must remind ourselves of something mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, namely that Spinoza uses 1def3, 1def5, and 1ax1 to describe the opposition between substance and mode as contradictory predicates. Accordingly, everything that qualifies as either a substance or a mode.

These observations suggest that Spinoza is working toward a categorical differentiation between two types of entities, without simply deriving it from the objects themselves. On the contrary, Spinoza’s first actions regarding this categorical difference are merely to describe it (1def3 and 1def5) and to specify its contradictoriness (1ax1). Next, a justification is given (1p1), only after which are we treated to a gradual elucidation of said difference’s ontological implications (1p15–1p36). It is only in this final step that we are told, in passing, which objects are to be subsumed under which category (1p11dem and 1p15s). Once this point

has been reached, Spinoza can finally use the remaining parts of the *Ethics* to reveal the concrete implications of these categories for the human being.²⁷

It is crucial to note that the entire *Ethics* remains fully committed to this categorical difference. Apparently, Spinoza does consider it a possibility that properties originally reserved for the substance can, under certain circumstances, also occur in some aspects of modes. For instance, while it is by definition impossible that finite objects are eternal, there exist eternal truths about their essence, and knowledge of these truths reveals the eternity of those parts of the mind that can indeed become eternal. Modes—in this case, the human mind—can therefore approximate the substance in their being, but they can never become substance themselves.²⁸

If it is true that the opposition of substance and mode serves to establish a categorical difference, we must also rethink the significance of their relationship for the argument laid out in the *Ethics*. That relationship is defined not by the modes' *ontological inherence* in the substance but by their *categorical difference*—which therefore also constitutes the key structural component of Spinoza's approach. The definition of modes as modifications (*affectiones*) of a substance merely gives us a clue about their categorical difference; it does not establish an ontological relationship between modes and that which the text later identifies as substance.²⁹ A mode, then, is by no means something that inheres in God in the manner of an accident but rather something that is not substance. Not until the later parts of the *Ethics* do we see what that means concretely (for which reason, going into further detail would be inappropriate at this point). But we can already discern the decisive thrust behind this description: modes—being different from substances

27. Cramer 1977, 542–3, maintains that Spinoza's definitions are actually meant to introduce descriptive notions, rather than categories or determinations of reflection. Based on the sequence of passages outlined above, we can reconcile Cramer's thesis with the assumption in play here—that Spinoza's distinction between substance and mode constitutes a categorical difference.

28. For an opposing view, see Kisser 1998, 68–9, who indirectly rejects this categorical difference in his interpretation of the ontological determinations of Spinoza's metaphysics. Kisser refers to the practical orientation of these determinations as a "subjectification of the substance, which goes hand in hand with a substantiation of the subject."

29. This is illustrated by the fact that whenever Spinoza refers to particular things as modes, he no longer simply speaks of *modi*, *affectiones*, or *modificationes substantiae* but only of *modi* or *modificationes attributae Dei*. Thus, while the definition of "mode" sticks to the traditional use of the expression *affectiones substantiae*, the subsumption of particular things under the rubric of modes requires a more refined model made up of several levels. Any failure to distinguish between those levels almost necessarily results in a pantheistic reading of Spinoza, as Kaplan 1989, 36, has shown with regard to Leibniz, Malebranche, and Bayle.

and therefore lacking their self-sufficiency—are things that, as a matter of principle, depend on something else.

*d) The Meta-Theoretical Claim behind Spinoza's
Necessitarianism and Its Implications for the Theory
of Causality*

The above interpretation of the concepts of substance and mode also has a significant impact on our understanding of Spinoza's theory of causality. For the distinction between substance and mode compels us to differentiate between two fundamentally different types of theoretical objects. As articulated in the theory of causality, found in the second half of Part One, substance and mode correspond to two different kinds of causal explanation: the substance's existence and properties can be derived directly from its definition, making it possible to discern its qualities purely from the way in which it is conceived; individual modes, on the other hand, always hinge upon external causes. Thus, the essence of modes reveals neither their existence nor their effective properties, and the concept of mode alone does not get us very far.

In the third and fourth axioms of Part One, however, Spinoza maintains that causation within modes is also a necessary relation and that it can be apprehended through conceptual relations. Furthermore, in propositions 1p29 and 1p33, we see Spinoza assume a necessitarianism that precludes the possibility of the world's being different from the way it actually is—an assumption occasionally justified by his claim that every being is in God and could not be comprehended without God.³⁰ The question is how this can be reconciled with the impossibility of deriving the existence and causal properties of modes (and, it may be shown, the individual essences of specific modes) from the concept of substance, rather than from infinitely many other modes.

This problem can be solved by assuming that Spinoza's necessitarianism is concerned only with the general issue of the explainability of causal relations and is not meant to actually describe them. This solution revolves around the following: when we want to explain the causation of specific effects, we usually assume that causal effects are not arbitrary, which is why they should be accessible, in principle, through an analysis of necessary, conceptual relationships. This includes effects that emerge from an accumulation of causal influences, for even though these effects are harder to predict, they are no less intelligible than

30. 1p29 is based on 1p15: "Quicquid est, in Deo est, et nihil sine Deo esse neque concipi potest" (G II, 56; C I 419).

the effects of simple causes.³¹ All this corresponds well with the expectations we implicitly hold regarding the explanation of changes. Intending to explain the evolution of the climate, for instance, we may find out that unexpected changes have occurred, a result we would ordinarily account for by saying that the conditions have changed and that we have misinterpreted some *specific* causal relation. But we do not dismiss the causation of changes in climate as something completely arbitrary. The view that causal relations are ultimately necessary and intelligible therefore entails neither that we are familiar with all the influences leading to a particular event nor that all the antecedents of future events are currently available to us. Thus, Spinoza's necessitarianism neither culminates in fatalism nor implies that possibility statements are impossible or meaningless. On the contrary, future analyses will show that Spinoza often makes indirect statements to the effect that something is, at least in principle, conceivable or possible.³²

In particular, this interpretation of Spinoza's necessitarianism does not explain why specifically modes happen to act the way they do. That sheds some light on Spinoza's notion of infinite modes, which he also discusses in connection with his theory of causality. As we just saw, it is one thing to maintain that causal relations, even when applied to individual objects, can be reduced to necessary and ultimately conceptual relations, whereas it is a different thing altogether to explain how specific, concrete events ever see the light of day. But there is a third issue at stake here: we may also inquire into the conditions of the possibility of such a causal explanation. What are the precise conditions under which a complete, purely conceptual understanding of causal events—or, in other words, an explanation based solely on conceptual relations—becomes possible?

At this point, we should remind ourselves of Spinoza's concept of nature, which stipulates the causal connectedness of everything with everything else. This means that the complete and purely conceptual knowledge of any given causal event requires a concept of all causal interactions occurring among all things. Such a concept, which would, more or less, represent the holistically structured

31. For the intelligibility of causality, see Della Rocca 2003a.

32. See Schütt 1985, who has shown that Spinoza's conception of modality is far more traditional than could be assumed from the "ornamental modal rhetoric," as he calls it (182). Those who debate whether Spinoza was "merely" a determinist (Curley and Walski 1999) or was actually a necessitarian (Garrett 1991) miss the decisive question: how is 1p33 compatible with Spinoza's conception of human freedom, a stance he develops in Part Five of the *Ethics*? This problem can only be solved if we follow my suggestion and interpret *de Deo* as a general ontology largely operating on a meta-theoretical level. This kind of ontology has nothing to say about why particular things act the way they do or under which conditions humans are able to influence their own behavior. For a breakdown of this problem, see Perler 2011.

reality, is indeed intelligible, which is why we can postulate its existence even though we may never actually possess it.

In my view, it is this concept of an actually existing holism entailed in the idea of a purely conceptual understanding of causal events that Spinoza alludes to in 1p23, where he introduces the notion of infinite modes—a notion that he later revisits in connection with the concepts of the infinite intellect, or the idea of God. However, interpreting the notion of infinite modes in this way raises the question whether we should not actually refrain from equating the idea of God with an instantiated mental state of an infinite intellect. Doing so would mean understanding the idea of God as some sort of limit concept for our own thought, laying out the requirements for purely conceptual knowledge without necessarily implying that this limit concept actually exists in any one mind.³³ As far as the causality of finite modes and their properties are concerned, that would explain why, in the causal analysis of individual cases, we always refer to some concrete information, despite our hypothesis that all events are fully explainable and in principle ascertainable through purely conceptual relations. As I will show in detail later on, Spinoza does indeed subscribe to this view.³⁴

So this interpretation has a lot going for itself. In particular, the picture it paints of the role that empirical knowledge plays in Spinoza's philosophy is very different from what one would expect. It suggests that if we want to explain, based on our current level of knowledge, why a certain state of affairs, rather than some other, persists, then we must take an empirical route (in a broad sense of the word) and include historical, linguistic, biographical, and—last but not least—physical knowledge. The purely ontological categorization of objects as modifications of an attribute of the divine substance, on the other hand, can give us no more than a clue as to which general property enables us to conceive of anything at all as existing.³⁵

33. One could object that, in 1p31s, Spinoza characterizes the (infinite) intellect as constantly actual (*actu*). However, we can also read this passage as a first plea for a cognitivist view of mental capacities. According to this view, mental capacities do not go beyond the actual cognitions we have. As we will see later on, this approach is also at the root of the identification of the human mind with an idea (Part III, Chapter 10, § a). Put this way, 1p31s actually supports the interpretation above. For if the infinite intellect consists merely in infinite *intellectio*, then this would ultimately amount to asserting an unlimited intelligibility of nature; what would not be implied is the existence of some epistemic subject that would permanently possess or produce this knowledge. The view of infinite modes as noninstantiated entities would also be congruent with the grammatical interpretation of that term suggested by Gabbey 2008.

34. See especially Part III, Chapter 9.

35. See Part II, Chapter 6, § a.

This shows that Spinoza's theory of causality—at least in those places where the causation of single objects is at stake—is actually a *meta*-theory. It does not reveal in detail *how* the existence, essence, and action of individual objects are caused but only lays open the conditions that must be met for us to understand *that* they have a cause. On the one hand, we have to assume that every causation of objects is ultimately necessary and thus intelligible. On the other hand, we also have to acknowledge the complex interplay of many direct and indirect influences that lets us approach each concrete case with nothing but an approximate understanding of why something is exactly the way it is.

*e) What It Means for Humans
or Human Minds to Be Modes*

After these remarks, we can finally turn our attention to the question that was raised at the beginning of this chapter: what does it mean that humans or human minds are classified as modes, and what are the implications of this view for Spinoza's theory of the human mind? At the most fundamental level, it simply means that human beings and their thoughts belong to the category of things that depend on something other than themselves, which of course disqualifies the human mind from being a substance, as Descartes had claimed, or from being part of a substantial complex, as was the case for Thomas Aquinas. That, in turn, tells us that humans have no absolute command over their ideas or actions since both are always at least partly contingent upon external causes. And yet, that humans and human minds are modes does not imply that what somebody thinks or does directly depends on the divine substance. Thus, no human being can rightfully claim that she is acting as an instrument of God.³⁶ However, that a mode's ontological dependency on the substance does not entail a direct causal relation indicates a heightened theoretical appreciation of the reciprocal influences among the modes.

This increases the systematic significance of theoretical discussions that target specific aspects of modes, as we can find them in Spinoza's physics or his theory of the human mind. Granted, the meta-theoretical definitions concerning the substance, or rather the concept, of being or even the general necessity of causal relations must also apply to modes. Nonetheless, Spinoza's physics and his theory of the mind constitute autonomous theoretical complexes, which cannot simply be considered appendices to his metaphysics. That is because they deal with

36. In other words, we can observe a direct link between Spinoza's ontology and his criticism of prophetic speech in the second chapter of the TTP. But this is the case only if one decides to accept the reading of Spinoza's ontology proposed here.

problems that simply cannot be treated justly from a general ontological perspective. The edifice of knowledge constructed in the *Ethics* is no grandly conceived universalist temple but a house with many rooms that are interconnected in many different ways.

Finally, Spinoza's categorization of the human being as a mode corresponds to a very specific notion of freedom: as humans, we will never be able to overcome our ontological dependency, nor will we ever become God. Thus, we will forever depend on the physical makeup of our bodies, our natural environment, and other human beings, not without being painfully aware, at times, that this dependency exists. But getting to know the factors that constitute this dependency and understanding their influence on our lives will at least allow us to shape our existence within the confines of this dependency. Thus, the ethical project endorsed by the *Ethics* is based on a double commitment: while humans can never be God and will never be self-sufficient, their being modes is also what enables them to mold the conditions of their existence.

The Concept of the Individual and Its Scope

ASIDE FROM THE categorical distinction between substance and mode, another important feature of Spinoza's approach is his concept of individuality. This concept *prima facie* belongs to the domain of his physics since the expression *individuum* is formally introduced in the sole definition of the physical digression following 2p13. Apparently, Spinoza considers the moving body to be the prototype of an individual. On the other hand, the *Ethics* also regularly applies the term *individuum* to objects that cannot readily be counted among the moving bodies. For example, Spinoza refers not only to the human mind as an individual but also and especially to social communities, institutions, and states. This raises the question of what exactly is being conveyed when the *Ethics* resorts to calling something an individual.

In the following, I explore this question in three consecutive steps. First, I analyze the physical definition of what constitutes an individual in greater detail. It is worth inquiring into the actual agenda behind the definition, to see what it tells us about the function of this concept for the theoretical structure of the *Ethics* (a). Next, I examine how Spinoza's concept of the individual relates to various terminological and conceptual premises. In this context, I discuss its relationship to the terminology of Cartesian physics and demonstrate how Spinoza's views take into account a number of intuitions that inform the ontological concepts involved in the scholastic notion of individuality (b). Only then will I confront the issue of ascribing individuality to the human mind as well as to organized political communities such as states. For instance, what does it mean for collectives to be guided, by all appearances, by a single mind (c)?

a) *When Is Something an Individual?*

In his physical digression, Spinoza defines the concept of the individual as follows:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from the others bodies by this union of bodies.¹

I would like to point out three aspects of this definition:

1. From a purely formal point of view, the physical definition stipulates a terminology, rather than delineating the nature of something. Less interested in discussing the question of *what* an individual actually is, it merely tells us *when* it is permissible to refer to an aggregation of bodies or objects as an individual. In other words, the definition refrains from elaborating on the intension of the term *individuum* while focusing on explicating its extensional constraints.
2. A closer look at those extensional constraints reveals that *individuum* is Spinoza's name for two genuinely different kinds of complex bodies. On the one hand, something is an individual if several bodies are conjoined so closely that they constitute a single unit of motion. On the other hand, we are dealing with an individual if the discrete components of a larger body communicate motions according to specific laws. We can therefore assume that Spinoza pictures at least two fundamentally different ways of forming a physical individual. But this does not imply that he postulates two distinct classes of individuals. On the contrary, while he obviously thinks of different kinds of objects—such as stones or projectiles, on the one hand, and living bodies or hydraulic systems, on the other—we can easily envision hybrids and transitions from one to the other. That is because individuals are themselves composed of bodies, which may include different types of individuals. A snail,

1. "Cum corpora aliquot eiusdem aut diversae magnitudinis a reliquis ita coercentur, ut invicem incumbant, vel si eodem aut diversis celeritatis gradibus moventur, ut motus suos invicem certa quadam ratione communicent, illa corpora invicem unita dicemus, et omnia simul unum corpus, sive individuum componere, quod a reliquis per hanc corporum unionem distinguitur" (G II, 99–100; C I, 460).

- for instance, can be said to consist of two different types of individual; and human beings, too, are likely made up of individuals belonging to either type.
3. Looking at its location in the physical digression, it becomes clear that the definition fulfills a very specific function within the framework of Spinoza's physics. The physical digression basically consists of two parts. The first half, which is concerned with the simplest kind of bodies, *corpora simplicissima*, all but entirely reproduces the mechanical foundations of Descartes' physics, whereas the second part surveys the constitution and properties of complex bodies. The definition of *individuum* occurs immediately after the announcement of the second part. This is a clear sign that the definition of the individual works like a kind of transmitter: explicating the conditions under which composite bodies act as individuals, it makes sure that complex bodies are subject to the same mechanistic laws of nature that have previously been described for simple bodies. It is, then, a pivotal conceptual foundation that ensures the general applicability of mechanistic explanations to problems pertaining to the constitution of living bodies and elucidations of some of their properties.²

Thus, the physical description of what characterizes something as an individual allows for genuinely different objects to qualify as individuals. The term "individual" is not meant to refer to a specific type of thing; rather, it serves to integrate genuinely different kinds of entities into the realm of physics.³ While Spinoza clearly considers physics to be a conceptual continuum, he does so without boiling everything down to a common theoretical denominator, which means that individuals, as he understands them, can be created by a variety of physical processes. At its conceptual core, the physical concept of an individual is, therefore, at the same time remarkably comprehensive and extremely differentiated. Thus, when it comes to reconstructing some of Spinoza's views regarding the individuality of things, we must always ask ourselves how the term "individual" is used in each case.

2. In connection with this subject matter, Gaukroger 2011, 128, refers to a "move from mechanics to matter theory." In my view, he underestimates the extent to which Spinoza moves beyond a mere application of Descartes' mechanics here.

3. For this reason, I suggest we refrain from treating Spinoza's physical conception of individuality as if it were an answer to the problem of personal identity (see Saw 1972, 92–3; Ablondi and Barbone 1994, 71 ff.). That does not eliminate the potential need to take the concept of individuality into account when it comes to explaining what Spinoza considers persons to be. For a critique of Saw from a position that emphasizes Spinoza's pre-Lockean approach, see Rice 1975.

*b) Physics and Metaphysics: Which Kinds
of Entities Are Individuals?*

Our analysis of the physical definition has made clear how refined and differentiated Spinoza's conception of individuality actually is. If further confirmation is needed, we can easily find it by taking a closer look at implicit references to various traditional contexts. Let us first examine how the *Ethics* differentiates between terms such as *individuum*, on the one hand, and *divisibilis* and *indivisibilis*, on the other. In his *Principia Philosophia*, Descartes made use of this distinction to refute the atomistic hypothesis of the smallest, indivisible particle—a move that can also be found in Spinoza's DPP.⁴ In the *Ethics*, however, Spinoza follows a different approach. While remaining in complete agreement with Descartes on the issue of atomism, he seeks to avoid giving the impression that he is just rehearsing the Cartesian argument. The terms *divisibilis* and *indivisibilis*, for instance, are now strictly reserved for a different systematic context, namely the discussion surrounding the divisibility of the one substance, whereas the term *individuum* is introduced in the physical digression.⁵

To understand the purpose of this strategy, recall the points in the metaphysics laid out in *de Deo* given above. By applying the two terminologies to fundamentally different contexts, Spinoza implicitly distinguishes two levels, a metaphysical level and a physical level. The metaphysics is concerned with problems such as those regarding the divisibility of the substance and, by extension, the ontological status of different kinds of conceptual distinctions; the physics, on the other hand, examines the constitution of complex bodies.⁶ This implicit differentiation between two theoretical levels is by no means absolute. Clearly, certain phenomena can and must be discussed on both levels. This is illustrated by 1P15s, in which Spinoza discusses the ontological status of the difference between parts of water. Unsurprisingly, he concludes that this difference can only be a *distinctio*

4. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes gives conceptual reasons for rejecting the atomistic hypothesis: if there were atoms, they would have to be considered extensional entities, which would make them divisible at least in thought. But whatever is divisible in thought also is divisible in reality (AT VIII, 51). Without registering any objections, Spinoza repeats this argument in his DPP (G I, 190; C I, 268). We can therefore assume that he shares Descartes' line of reasoning, at least in those instances where it actually applies to physics, i.e., to finite extensional quantities.

5. See 1P15s, which states that the substance is indivisible, which means that the different parts of matter are merely modally different. G II, 59–60; C I 423.

6. In my view, this implicit distinction tends to be neglected by those readers who seek to locate the foundational notions of Spinoza's physics in his metaphysics. Examples are Bennett 1984 and, following him, Esfeld 1995.

modalis, rather than a *distinctio realis*.⁷ He certainly does not deny, however, that the factual partition of a body of water into smaller amounts constitutes a physical process, which affects the individuality of these very volumes of water.

Thus, Spinoza apparently proceeds from the assumption that many things can be considered on a physical as well as a metaphysical level, without it being the case that these two areas of inquiry are therefore meant to tackle the same questions. The point behind this structural feature of Spinoza's approach comes to the fore as soon as we realize that there is a problem that can only be discussed on one of the two levels: the problem of the uniqueness of the substance. That there can only be a single substance is not an instance of individuality but merely an instance of indivisibility. That is perfectly plausible, considering the definition of *individuum*, as discussed above. Given this definition, only things consisting of a plurality of parts can meaningfully be described as individuals. That may be the case for entities that can be viewed as modes but not for anything that qualifies as a substance.

This confirms what we have already seen in connection with Spinoza's conception of metaphysics, namely that his substance monism is a purely ontological affair without any physical equivalent. Confirmation comes precisely from the notion of individuality, a term whose allegedly universal applicability may be taken to contradict any suggestion that there might be a categorical difference between substance and mode. Thus, it would be wrong to assume that by advancing his substance monism, Spinoza would implicitly endorse the reduction of philosophy to physics. That claim is actually an expression of his naturalism, which revolves around the radical rejection of any kind of transcendence. Moreover, by dismissing substance dualism in any form, Spinoza by no means advocates a version of Cartesian, mechanistic materialism, as we find, for instance, in Henricus Regius.⁸ Spinoza supports neither an explanatory nor an ontological

7. If there is anything surprising about Spinoza's metaphysics, it lies in the kinds of object targeted by the notions of substance and mode. Unsurprising, on the other hand, is Spinoza's later understanding of the distinctions between them. These distinctions simply correspond to those made by Descartes in his *Principles of Philosophy* (AT VIII, 28–30). According to Suárez, it is not even possible to view the relationship between modes as a *distinctio* issue since this relationship cannot be observed in and by itself but only with regard to the *res* whose modes they are (1866, VII, I, §§ 25–6).

8. Leaving aside Regius' attitude toward theological doctrine, we must at least assume that his position would amount to something like this. See especially his *Philosophia Naturalis*, 1647, 406–7. See also van Ruler 2009 for the question of Spinoza's naturalism within the context of Dutch thought. Van Ruler cautions against viewing Spinoza as a precursor of modern naturalism. Instead, he reads the *Ethics* as a "heroic attempt to do justice to the conditions of a Renaissance moral philosophy, within the framework of the newly developed mechanistic philosophy" (416).

preeminence of a certain type of entity but champions a single notion of being or, in modern parlance, a single notion of reality.⁹ Neither is he therefore a physicalist in the modern sense of the word.

No less refined than his handling of Cartesian physics and its terminology is how Spinoza deals with the traditional Aristotelian connotations of the concept of the individual. One has to be aware here that in seventeenth-century scholasticism, the term *individuum* had two basic meanings. On the one hand, it was used as a synonym for *res singularis*; on the other hand, it stood for the “lowest species.”¹⁰ In devising his own concept of the individual, Spinoza harks back to both meanings—but what matters most is once again *how* he does it.

Definition seven of Part Two explicitly addresses the term *res singularis* and is therefore particularly relevant. After alleging, in the first sentence, that singular things are finite things,¹¹ 2def7 continues by stating that several individuals can form one singular thing, provided they come together in one action and act in conjunction with one another to cause one effect.¹² This is the first indication in the *Ethics* that Spinoza regards the unity of finite things as something inherently relative—an idea that is later borne out by the definition of the individual. In contrast to the one substance, finite things are in constant interaction with other things. Thus, the exact lines of demarcation between objects, and thus whether or not something is a singular thing, can never be determined outright but only on a case-by-case basis.

But why is it that Spinoza needs two terms in the first place—the notion of the singular thing and the notion of the individual? Apparently, the same things that bear the denomination *res singularis* can also be called *individua*, with both labels conferring merely a relative measure of unity. What is the intention behind this terminological duality?

9. See the previous chapter, as well as Part II, Chapter 6. Here is the reason why this structural division between metaphysics, where substance is defended, and other theoretical levels, such as physics or philosophy of mind that allow for different individuals, is so important for our current reconstruction: it ensures that the numerical difference between epistemic subjects does not result in a plurality of “worlds” since all subjects are ultimately linked to one single world or reality, namely the one in which they are actually located.

10. See the entry in Goclenius’ *Lexicon Philosophicum*, which defines this notion as follows: “Per individua interdum intelliguntur singularia, quae numero inter se sunt distincta, ut sunt Cicero, Petrus: interdum species individuae seu ultimae, ad quas usque progrediendum est dividendo, & ibi consistendu” (232–3).

11. “Per res singulares intelligo res, quae finitae sunt et determinatam habent existentiam” (G II, 85; CI, 474).

12. “Quod si plura individua in una actione ita concurrant, ut omnia simul unius effectus sint causa, eadem omnia eatenus ut unam rem singularem considero” (G II, 85; CI, 474).

On comparing them, we realize the following: when these two terms ascribe unity to things, they do so in different respects. The designation *res singularis* identifies something as the cause behind a certain action or effect. *Individuum*, on the other hand, is used when the focus is on the physical constitution of things. As 2def7 shows, these two perspectives are compatible. If, from an ontological point of view, something qualifies as a *res singularis* by acting as the unified cause behind a certain action, it can still turn out to be a relatively loose aggregate of individuals when considered from a physical point of view. This matters, for instance, when it comes to the difference between attributing action and explaining behavior, for by distinguishing between the terms *res singularis* and *individuum*, we can simultaneously identify a person as the ontological cause of an action and explore the possibility that it was the person's specific physical-physiological makeup that led to the action—for example, a brain defect or a hyperactive spleen.¹³

Thus, the terminological coexistence of *res singularis* and *individuum* has a different function from the opposition of *indivisible* and *individuum*. Whereas the latter indicates that certain metaphysical questions cannot be solved through physics, the binary *res singularis* and *individuum* allows for an approach to finite things that stipulates the compatibility of different descriptions. Thus, anything that 2def7 characterizes as a *res singularis* can also qualify as an individual, yet without assuming the identity of these two descriptions. It is one thing to decide on an ontological level whether there is a unified cause behind an effect, but it is another thing to examine how a body is composed. We can see now that Spinoza's use of the terms *res singularis* and *individuum* confirms the point made earlier in connection with the problem of causality: that the distinction between substance and mode also lays the foundation for the distinction between two fundamentally different theoretical domains. On the other hand, it also enables a plurality of theoretical perspectives with regard to finite bodies.¹⁴

But what about the second traditional meaning, according to which, the lowest species, too, are *individua*? What is immediately striking is that the term *forma*, with its Aristotelian connotations, appears precisely in the discussion of the properties of physical individuals. The fourth lemma of the physical digression, for instance, states that an individual maintains its form if some of its

13. With this definition, Spinoza demonstrates how the theoretical perspectives complement each other, without it being the case that one is consumed by the other. This also protects him against the sort of mereological fallacy that critics such as Bennett and Hacker (2003, 73–4) accuse today's neurophysiology of committing.

14. See Chapter 2, §§ c and e.

parts are replaced by bodies that are functionally equivalent.¹⁵ Apparently, the lemma equates the persistence of a body's form with the functional preservation of the system that constitutes its individuality. With this move, Spinoza kills two birds with one stone. On the one hand, he undermines any recourse to substantial forms, which is made quite clear by the proof to the lemma. On the other hand, he also acknowledges a central intuition behind the traditional concept of form: the intuition that a body cannot undergo metamorphosis without either perishing or becoming a numerically different entity.¹⁶

Thus, Spinoza's concept of form differs from the Aristotelian concept in that it serves merely as an *explanandum*, and not as an *explanans*, within natural philosophy. One way of putting it would be to say that Spinoza affirms a species-related persistence of individuals, which leads him to take into account all the implications of there being different forms of individuation and different forms through which individuals persist—despite his rejection of the concept of substantial form. But beyond the preservation of individuals, it makes no sense for Spinoza to talk about the preservation of the species.

We can conclude this section by maintaining that Spinoza makes no *universal* use of the concept of the individual, despite his applying it to various kinds of entities. In fact, the implicit limitations he puts on the term tell us where he draws the line between physics and metaphysics. While he denies that the instruments of physics could ever solve issues pertaining to the properties of the substance, he assigns all questions about the specific forms of an object's constitution and persistence to the philosophy of nature. Yet, on top of all that, there is one issue that can be approached from both an ontological and a physical perspective: the issue of the unity of finite things. Generally speaking, when we ascribe unity to a finite thing, we do so from a specific point of view. It is our theoretical interest that determines whether to ascribe unity to an entity by considering its effect or by examining its physical constitution.

15. "Si corporis sive individui, quod ex pluribus corporibus componitur, quaedam corpora segregentur et simul totidem alia ejusdem naturae eorum loco succedant, retinebit individuum suam naturam uti antea absque ulla ejus formae mutatione" (G II, 100; C I, 460).

16. This point is made by Moreau (1994b, 27–35), in connection with his analysis of how Spinoza employs the concept of form. According to Moreau, the *Ethics* tacitly presupposes a very basic theory of something like forms—a theory whose central tenet is the rejection of metamorphoses. What makes this significant is Spinoza's claim that religious anthropomorphism is fed by the same anthropological sources as the assumption that metamorphoses do occur. Such a theory of forms is perfectly compatible with the assumption of there being universal laws of nature, i.e., laws encompassing all possible forms. In fact, these laws of nature may even be constitutive for the forms (see Moreau 1994b, 32–3). Zourabichvili 2002, 26–7 also emphasizes the function of the concept of individuality in this context.

c) *Bodies Politic and Minds: Authentic and Inauthentic Individuals*

Now we can finally turn our attention to the problem raised at the beginning of this chapter: the individuality of political states and of minds. In what sense does the *Ethics* conceive of the human mind as an individual? How about the state? And if the state is an individual, what are the implications for Spinoza's theory of mind?

As mentioned before, there are several passages in which Spinoza refers to the human mind as an individual. Interestingly, the first of these occurs at a point before the concept of the individual has even been introduced. That passage is 2p11, which describes the human mind as the idea of a *res singularis*. Apparently, this is a place where Spinoza employs the aforementioned terminological equivalence between *res singularis* and *individuum*: something that qualifies as a *res singularis* is also an individual. And since Spinoza thinks that non-attribute-specific qualities of objects also apply to their ideas, the idea of a particular thing is an individual as well. Thus, the characterization of the human mind as an individual is not a question of being physically constituted in a certain way but ultimately depends solely on *its object being a singular thing*.¹⁷

The situation is different for the individuality of groups. It has been discussed at great length whether states—or, more generally, social collectives of singular people—are individuals in the Spinozistic sense of the word or whether Spinoza speaks metaphorically¹⁸ when he says, in Part Four of the *Ethics*, that humans can best preserve their being by agreeing with each other to such an extent “that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body.”¹⁹

17. See Part III, Chapter 10, § d.

18. The *locus classicus* for literal readings of the citation from 4p18s that follows is Matheron 1969, 347, who states, “L’Etat est donc, très exactement, un Individu au sens spinoziste du mot.” In contrast, Gueroult 1974, 170, n. 78, remarks upon the relevant passages (esp. 4p18s) as follows: “Il y a donc là une simple analogie. De plus, il s’agit là, non d’un fait, mais d’un dictamen Rationis.” Other critics opting for a metaphorical reading are Den Uyl 1983; Rice 1990b, 277; and Barbone 2002, 106. Moreau 1994a, 427–65 defends the literal understanding, as does Matheron 2003, who has recently addressed the question in yet another philological study that is as pointed as it is detailed. Here, Matheron reaches the double conclusion that the state is indeed an individual in the proper sense but that it does not possess a *mens* in the proper sense. Focusing on an alleged interdependence between individuation and transindividuality, Balibar 1996 and 2001 tries to avoid the conflict between a literal and a metaphorical reading altogether.

19. “[N]ihil, inquam, homines praestantius ad suum esse conservandum optare possunt, quam quod omnes in omnibus ita convenient, ut omnium mentes et corpora unam quasi mentem unumque corpus component” (4p18s, G II, 223; C I, 556).

The chief outcome of this debate is that the question calls for a differentiated judgment. In and by itself, the query “literal or metaphorical” says nothing about the political theory that may be the aim here. On the corporeal level at least, Spinoza surely considers states to be individuals in the literal sense. It is true, after all, that states are aggregations of bodies whose motions are coordinated by specific laws.²⁰ In view of Spinoza’s concept of the individual, however, this thesis is not as strong as could be assumed at first sight. That something is part of a greater individual, for instance, does not eliminate the individuality of that part. Moreover, the laws that constitute the social body by governing the communication of motion in its interior can be of various kinds.²¹ Thus, even a literal reading of the passage quoted above allows for liberal interpretations.

It must, secondly, be pointed out that Spinoza is more cautious when it comes to the question of whether or not states and social groups have one singular mind. While the citation above simply refers to one single body, it qualifies the words “one single mind” by inserting “as it were” (*quasi mentem unum*). In other passages, Spinoza relativizes his remarks in a similar way. In his *Tractatus Politicus*, for instance, he says that judging from the distribution of rights within a state, it is *as if* the crowd were led by one mind (*veluti una mente*).²² The same goes for another text relevant here, which is surely the most interesting from a phenomenological point of view: in his letter to Peter Balling, Spinoza writes that a father who loves his son can only be “*quasi*-identical” with him.²³ Here, too, Spinoza uses the word *quasi* to qualify his remark that father and son may constitute a single entity. Furthermore, the letter makes especially clear that the idea of a mental unity is merely a question of the father’s imagination. It is the father whose love prompts him to consider himself to be a part of his son and identical with him. So, again, Spinoza does not ponder the idea of a collective mind but rather highlights the consequences that certain identifications with other people might have on a phenomenological level. These consequences are not trivial, which is borne out by the fact that Spinoza can use them to explain why fathers may be under the impression of perceiving the affections of their deceased

20. See Moreau 1994a, 444–5; Matheron 2003, 132.

21. This is brought home especially by Moreau’s analysis. Moreau sees different forms of social individual at work in Spinoza (1994a, 447–59), also emphasizing that the centrifugal forces social bodies have to deal with are very different from those encountered by biological bodies (448).

22. TP, 3, § 2, G III, 284–5; C I, 516–8. For this passage, see also Balibar 2001, 126 ff.

23. “[N]empe, pater (ut tui simile adducam exemplum) adeo filium suum amat, ut is, & dilectus filius quasi unus, idemque sint” (G IV, 77; C I, 353).

sons. But it should be obvious that the alleged mental unity of two bodies is not meant in the strict sense here.

Thus, there is a clear rationale behind Spinoza's use of the particle *quasi* in these passages. While he apparently acknowledges the existence of collective bodies, the idea of an actual group mind is quite alien to him. Instead of causing a group mind to emerge, a father's identification with his son merely indicates that, in the father's mind, the two of them now form an imaginary unit. Likewise, the state's being a collective body—and thus an individual in the proper sense—does not imply that states also have minds in the proper sense. As I will show later on, this is crucial to the general approach of Spinoza's political philosophy.²⁴

One could object that there actually is one passage in which Spinoza attributes to the state a sort of mental unity without prefacing his statement with qualifying particles such as *veluti* or *quasi*. That moment comes when he declares that a state's laws represent its soul (*anima*).²⁵ We can indeed assume that in terms of their coherence and rule-based behavior, the laws of the state achieve a level of coordination that is comparable to the organic control of complex bodies. But why is it that Spinoza “only” mentions the state's *anima*, keeping silent about its *mens*? It seems likely that he does so because the usage of the term *mens* is governed by more restrictive conditions than the usage of *anima* or the phrase *animata-esse*. While Spinoza uses the term *mens* only for beings capable of *possessing ideas*, he speaks of *animata-esse* even in those cases where he just asserts the existence of ideas *representing* a particular object.²⁶ But the fact that an idea of *x* exists is by no means coextensive with the fact that *x* has ideas. Not everything of which an idea can be formed has ideas itself. Thus, the reference to the parallelism between ideas and individual bodies or objects gives us the right merely to characterize a being as *animata-esse*, not to conclude that it possesses a *mens*.

We can now infer quite a few useful things about the concept of the mind. Apparently, a body's individuality is a sufficient condition only for being thought of as animated, not for being attributed a *mens*. Granted, whenever we encounter a body, we also encounter an idea. But even if we assume that all ideas about individuals are, by analogy, themselves individuals, these latter individuals are

24. See also Part III, Chapter 8, as well as Renz 2011, 114 ff.

25. TP, 10, § 9, G III, 357; C II, 600.

26. We can therefore assume, as do Bouveresse 1992 and Nadler 2006, 136, that Spinoza's so-called panpsychism is not so much a cosmological thesis as an epistemological one. Spinoza's goal here is not to establish the idea of a universal animateness but to safeguard the universal intelligibility of being. For more on this topic, see Part III, Chapter 11. For the asymmetry of a body's individuality saying nothing about its having a *mens*, see also Matheron 2003, 135. However, Matheron's understanding of the *mens humana* is different from mine.

not *eo ipso* minds. This is beautifully illustrated by the reference to the soul of the state: a state's laws can very well be described as the idea of a body politic constituting itself as an individual—and, thus, as the soul of precisely that corporeal individual. But a state's having a coherent constitution does not imply that it is capable of having ideas in its own right.

In conclusion, we can say that when Spinoza calls something an individual, he assumes that it is physically constituted in one way or another. As we have just seen, this is only indirectly the case when we are dealing with the human mind. In contrast to the state, the human mind can be considered an individual only by way of analogy. The mind is an individual only in the sense that it necessarily relates to an object which, meeting the criteria for a *res singularis*, is also an individual. Thus, this intentional relation to the body's individuality is constitutive for the individuality of the idea, which is why we cannot address the mind as an individual that could ever be separated from the body. However, the body's individuality is merely a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for there being a *mens*. As will be shown in detail later on, one further condition is required: an individual must be able to relate events to itself and, in conjunction with that, it must be able to have ideas about itself and its bodily affects. Thus, despite the rather deflationary tendency of Spinoza's approach, his concept of the human mind demands that a person be a subject and that she also understands herself as such. States lack this kind of subjectivity.

PART II

The Ontology of the Mental

On the Relationship between
Being and Thought

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The Primacy of the Metaphysics over the Theory of the Mind

WHEN WE TRY to explain an experience, we usually take it for granted that the experience is prompted by something real. We find ourselves, or someone else, entangled in certain events, which simply have to be acknowledged at first—even if they are ongoing and still subject to change. As we try to comprehend these events by reflecting on the circumstances that brought them about, our view of them might perhaps change. But in the very moment when we seek to explain an experience, we do assume that something has indeed happened. And our goal is simply to understand as clearly as possible the events underlying the experience, including their importance for us, and to reconstruct them in their causal context.

Here, I argue that a similar demand for a maximally complete causal reconstruction lies behind Spinoza's rationalism. Admittedly, the *Ethics* is less concerned with actually explaining concrete experiences than with exposing the preconditions for such a reconstruction. It must be emphasized, however, that Spinoza's aim is always knowledge of concrete beings—a view that stands in marked contrast to idealist and structuralist interpretations of the *Ethics*, which tend to reconstruct it as a self-contained and self-referential theoretical edifice. Rather, what the *Ethics* does is to provide a causal reconstruction of the things and events that we encounter and experience in our daily lives. This is not to deny that Spinoza's *Ethics* is replete with passages in which concepts are introduced with no apparent regard for what they refer to and discussed in their formal relations to one another.¹ But even those considerations, seemingly designed merely to elucidate the intension of concepts, ultimately furnish us with the conditions

1. Consider, for example, the analyses in Part I, Chapter 2, § c.

for a reconstruction of things and events with which we interact in our daily lives. In other words, the *Ethics* is not a system of thought in isolation but is always concerned with the problem of adequately thinking *of* something.

Thus, Spinoza's general ontology is marked by a genuinely antispeculative trait. Not only is this shown by his necessitarianism, which renders all talk of possible worlds meaningless, but it is particularly evident from his repeated refusal to accede to Tschirnhaus' request to demonstrate how the concept of extension can yield an a priori proof for a variety of things. According to Spinoza, we cannot *deduce* a variety of things—or, more precisely, a variety of bodies—from the concept of extension alone. But what we can and must do is *explicate* them based on the insight that extension is an essential attribute of God, or being.² Here, Spinoza explicitly rejects the demand for an a priori deduction of things in favor of a demand for explication only. He is apparently convinced that those things we encounter over and over in everyday life, which tend to occur as pluralities, can only be known a posteriori, which is to say that they can be reconstructed only in retrospect, by taking recourse to more fundamental concepts.³

This raises the question of how we are to understand the preamble with which Spinoza introduces his theory of the human mind in Part Two of the *Ethics*. It is striking that Spinoza, not only in contrast to Descartes in his *Meditations* but also in contrast to his own approach in the TdIE—indeed, in contrast to many philosophers engaging with the problem of the human mind—refrains from anchoring his reflections on the human mind in some kind of stylized introspection into one's own mind. Instead, we find the following brief preamble directly under the title to Part Two, *De Natura et Origine Mentis*:

I pass now to explaining those things which must necessarily follow from the essence of God, or the infinite and eternal being—not, indeed, all of them, for we have demonstrated (1p16) that infinitely many things must follow from it in infinitely many modes, but only those that can lead us, by

2. See Letter 83, in which Spinoza replies to Tschirnhaus, who registers his doubt that an attribute—for instance, extension—can give rise to the differentiation of bodies. Spinoza says, "You ask whether a variety of things can be demonstrated a priori from the concept of Extension alone. I believe I have already shown clearly enough that this is impossible, and that therefore Descartes defines matter badly by Extension, but that it must necessarily be explained by an attribute which expresses eternal and infinite essence" (C II, 487; G IV, 334). It is also to be noted that Spinoza considers his own remarks in the *Ethics* to be somewhat unclear, seeing that he concludes the section by saying, "For up till now I have not been able to set out anything concerning them in an orderly way" (C II, 487; G IV, 334).

3. On the other hand, see Schnepf 2011, 40–1. As Schnepf makes clear, this explication requires mediating concepts, which he locates in the infinite mode.

the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness.⁴

How are we to understand these sentences? Surely not in the sense that the concept of the human mind should genuinely be deduced from the concept of the divine substance. Such a program would not only clash with Spinoza's rejection of Tschirnhaus' request to demonstrate how a variety of things may be deduced a priori from the attributes. It would also be all but incompatible with the aforementioned view that the physics and the theory of mind, which both deal with specific aspects of the modes of certain attributes of the one substance, form relatively autonomous theoretical complexes.⁵ Instead of reading it as an announcement of a program of deduction, the preamble must therefore be interpreted as a simple signal that the text is about to move on to a different subject, one with which the reader is inherently familiar, namely the human mind. The preamble raises the prospect that the human mind can be better understood from all that follows from the essence of God. Finally, by hinting at a link to the problem of human happiness, the passage emphasizes just how relevant a philosophical knowledge of the human mind is for the entire enterprise. Thus, what initially appears to be a dramatic announcement turns out to be a simple acknowledgment of a thematic shift.

But this somewhat trivializing reading raises questions as well. In particular, it remains to be explained what it means for something to follow necessarily from the essence of God or the eternal and infinite being. For even if there is no supposition that the concept of the human mind is deduced, as it were, from the concept of God, it must nonetheless be taken into account that a certain connection is alleged to hold between the metaphysics and the theory of the human mind. What is the nature of this connection? Two issues require clarification. First, if something is meant to lead us to knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness, we must consider from what exactly this something is supposed to follow. Second, there is the question of what exactly is meant by the expression that something "follows" from something else.

As for the first issue, it is conspicuous that neither the cited preamble nor 1p16, on which the preamble relies, says anything about things following *from God*—they merely state that things follow "[f]rom the necessity of the divine nature" (1p16) or "necessarily . . . from the essence of God, or the infinite and eternal being" (2pref). This statement is purely formal in nature. But what the

4. C I, 446; G II, 84.

5. See Part I, Chapter 2, § e.

divine nature, or God's essence, actually consists in—and, thus, what those divine properties from which Spinoza claims to gain certain insights about the human mind and its happiness are—remains unclear until 2p1 and 2p2, propositions that determine God's attributes.⁶ When it mentions the essence of God, the text stops short of focusing on the specific origin of the mind or its properties. It merely highlights that the human mind, in what it is and does, as well as in that which defines its happiness, is subjected to the same universal system of determination that governs the being and actions of all things—a system that is identified with the necessity of the divine nature.⁷

It is more difficult to clarify the second issue. What does it mean to say that something *follows* from God's essence? To answer this question, we must make a detour and briefly discuss the meaning of the verb *sequi* in Descartes—at least as far as the verb's theoretical meaning is concerned, Spinoza probably borrows the notion from Cartesian logic. (I am not going to discuss the operational use of the set phrases *sequitur* and *hinc sequitur*, which frequently introduce the corollaries.)⁸ In a passage from the Latin version of the *Discourse on the Method* that is pivotal for 1p16, the word *sequi* is used to refer to the way in which things form a sequence in the human understanding when we apply the geometrical method.⁹ Thus, in Descartes's work, *sequi* signifies a specific relation between objects of knowledge or between the contents of ideas—a relation that must be postulated when further ideas are derived, by simple operations, from the idea of a simple, intuitively graspable thing.¹⁰

In his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes uses the example of simple geometric constructions to illustrate what exactly this relation consists

6. Bartuschat also emphasizes the formal character of Spinoza's ontology (1996, 59, and 2001). Yet, his interpretation of the beginning of the second part of the *Ethics* differs from my own. For Bartuschat, the axioms of Part Two are meant to provide the essential tools for determining the concrete content of the attributes mentioned in the first two propositions. This is not supported by the text. The axioms do not appear until we get to the proofs for 2p11–2p13, which are concerned with deriving the concept of the human mind.

7. See especially Spinoza's use of 1p16 in 1p26 and 1p29.

8. I doubt that the operational use of *sequitur* is in any way connected to the verb *sequi* in 1p16. But we should certainly consider Macherey 1998, 141, whose fascination with the verb *sequi* derives from his polysemic approach—or, more precisely, from his view that *sequi* expresses ontological and logical, as well as physical, dependencies.

9. Schnepf (2003, 40) has shown that 1p16 uses a slightly altered remark from the Latin version of Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*. Schnepf's point is reminiscent of Wolfson 1934, 373, who traces the origin of the verb *sequi* to medieval Hebrew philosophy, where it is used to refer to substances emanating from God.

10. Descartes explains this process quite comprehensively in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, e.g., Rule Three, § 4 ff. (CSM I, 14; AT X, 368–9).

in. He emphasizes two aspects. First, there is a certain *asymmetry* between the ideas in such a way that one can be derived from the other, yet without there being a logical dependence in the narrow sense. According to Descartes, ideas are not propositions whose mutual relations could be proven through syllogisms but notions whose relations of derivation are meant to be grounded in the nature of the object itself. Second, the epistemological justification for such derivation is that not only the first idea constituting the point of departure but also its connection with any other idea following from it is supposed to be *intuitively graspable*. This last point also illuminates why one of the elements of *sequi* relations is always the idea of a simple thing—for according to Descartes, only simple natures and that which follows from them are intuitively comprehensible.¹¹ Thus, y follows from x precisely if y is derived from x and if the connection between x and y is understood intuitively.

Spinoza deviates from this model in three different ways. First, as was made clear earlier by the correspondence with Tschirnhaus, the assumption of deductive or derivative connections takes a back seat to the demand for explication. The aim of his methodological approach is not to generate indubitable insight but to clarify our ideas and the relations between them. Second, in return, as it were, Spinoza abandons the view that the point of departure must be found in ideas of simple natures. We may be able to comprehend the properties of the divine nature intuitively, but this nature is by no means a simple thing, as Spinoza emphasizes in the same letter to Tschirnhaus.¹² Only against this background is it understandable that what follows from the divine nature is not a limited number of things, but “infinitely many things . . . in infinitely many modes.” Third, Spinoza assigns a different epistemological function to the claim that *sequi* relations are intuitively comprehensible. We must indeed assume that everything which in some way follows from some facet of the divine nature is, in principle, intuitively

11. It therefore makes sense that the *Discourse on the Method*, too, mentions that inquiries must proceed from the most simple things. See again the Latin version: “Jam enim sciebam res simplicissimas & cognitu facillimas, primas omnium esse examinandas” (AT VI, 550).

12. Tschirnhaus had asked how a variety of things could be proven from the concept of extension alone. This question is based on mathematics, which shows that deriving more than one property from a defined thing requires us to relate that thing to other things. Spinoza’s answer is twofold: on the one hand, he says that it is impossible a priori to prove a variety of things from extension; on the other hand, he differentiates between very simple things, or *entes rationes*, and real things. While it is true that only one property can be derived from simple things, this actually isn’t the case for God, who apparently is not counted among those simple things. The letter further shows that Spinoza is not dead set against a priori deduction from definitions; he merely asks what they are good for. Apparently, it is one thing to derive properties of things from their definitions and another thing altogether to derive a variety of things from a property of God.

graspable. Furthermore, as the passage in parentheses in 1p16 makes clear, that is the case for everything which can fall under an infinite intellect, that is, for everything that exists. But there is no need for us to know all the *sequi* relations among things to be able to rely on our knowledge.

These three departures are not trivial. On the contrary, they reveal that Spinoza turns the agenda of Cartesian logic on its head. That *y* follows from *x* does not mean that *y* is actually deduced from *x*, nor that the connection between *x* and *y* is actually understood intuitively. It only means that *y* can be explained or explicated through *x*, and that their connection is in principle intuitable. This is accompanied by a shift in the function of the alleged *sequi* relations: it is no longer Spinoza's goal, as it was for Descartes, to secure our quest for knowledge with what would ideally be an indubitable methodical starting point. Accordingly, the way in which Spinoza uses the Cartesian vocabulary for *sequi* relations does not imply a methodological commitment to a rationalist foundationalism. Instead, it hints at a basic possibility of acquiring knowledge, which emerges from the metaphysics laid out in Part One of the *Ethics*.

Thus, the same language that Descartes links to a *methodological* postulate is used by Spinoza to express an *ontological* premise of his epistemology. According to this premise, everything is subject to the necessary network of determination; and thus, everything must be explainable by the terms that we use to describe this necessity. In this sense, everything—whether it be simple or complex, far-fetched or obvious—must ultimately be explicable through the ideas of the essential properties of God or being. This does not rule out that, at least regarding some things, this is a rather ambitious and demanding enterprise, one that requires several intermediate steps and is therefore rarely ever brought to a chronological conclusion. But that is not a fundamental problem that would threaten the possibility of knowledge as such.

Thus, when Spinoza reminds us in the preamble to Part Two of the *Ethics* that the human mind, too, follows from the essential properties of God, he does not imply that it would therefore be derived from God; rather, his point is that the same ontological foundation on which his epistemology is based also applies to the theory of the human mind.

But why does Spinoza explicitly revisit this issue at this point? It seems to me that by doing so, he indirectly endorses a specific arrangement of philosophical disciplines that is opposed to Descartes' approach. More precisely, he advocates the return to the traditional primacy of metaphysics over epistemology—and we must assume that, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, he fully understood the fundamental challenge that Descartes' approach, through the *cogito*, poses for this traditional primacy. At this point, it would be useful to remind ourselves of how Descartes' order of philosophical disciplines, sketched out in his letter to

Picot, printed as a preface to the French edition of his *Principia Philosophiae*, was received by Dutch scholasticism. Famously, Descartes compares philosophy to a tree whose roots are metaphysics, whose trunk is physics (which includes the study of the human body), and whose branches are all the other sciences, notably mechanics, medicine, and ethics. One of the crucial points here is that Descartes understands metaphysics as a doctrine of the principles of human knowledge, which for him includes an explanation of the fundamental properties of God, a proof of the immateriality of the soul, and the discussion of clear and distinct ideas.¹³

Breaking with tradition, Descartes' program eliminated not only a large portion of the traditional contents of metaphysics but also the traditional grounding of philosophy and its unity in the *ordo rerum*.¹⁴ This break with tradition was apparently so radical that contemporary scholastics were either unwilling or unable to accept it. A good example is Johann Clauberg, a scholastic who produced several works in which he campaigned for the dissemination and didacticization of Descartes' philosophy. In his *Metaphysica de ente quae rectius Ontosophia*, Clauberg notes that a *prima philosophia* must first and foremost reflect on the *mens cogitans*, a move apparently designed to acknowledge Descartes' departure from the *ego cogitans*.¹⁵ At second glance, however, it becomes obvious that this is actually an attempt to assimilate Descartes' departure from the *cogito* to the program of a general ontology—as opposed to positing the *cogito* as the proper foundation of metaphysics. It is not Descartes' problem of justifying human knowledge that drives Clauberg's metaphysics but the general ontological inquiry into the *ens quatenus ens*.¹⁶ While this being qua being is essentially conceived as an *ens cogitabile*, it seems as if Clauberg had not fully realized that Descartes' departure from the *cogito* cannot simply be reconciled with the traditional program of a general metaphysics.

Things are somewhat different for Spinoza. His *Ethics* does not simply seek to assimilate the departure from the *cogito* to the program of a general ontology; instead, it offers two corrections to the Cartesian model of a unified philosophical science. First, he takes back one of the central provisions of Descartes' suggested revision of the concept of metaphysics: the principles of human knowledge no

13. AT IX, 13–14; CSM I, 185–6.

14. For a discussion of Descartes' claims, see Schulthess 1998, 73–4.

15. Clauberg 1968 (1691), I, 283.

16. Clauberg 1968 (1691), I, 281. For a comparison between Clauberg's metaphysics and the first part of the *Ethics*, see Schnepf 1996.

longer lay the foundation of philosophy; rather, a general ontology does—albeit one that, much like Clauberg's, has been reworked to reflect the problem of the knowability of being.¹⁷ Thus, metaphysics has primacy over all other disciplines discussed in the *Ethics*. This goes hand in hand with another correction that is of central importance for the inquiry into the significance of Spinoza's theory of the human mind: when Descartes identifies metaphysics with the theory of the principles of human knowledge, he collapses two things that Spinoza re-separates in his *Ethics*. While it is true that the theory of the human mind, for Spinoza, depends upon the metaphysics, he nonetheless treats it as a different discipline. Although ontological considerations are foundational for his approach, his observations about the human mind and the foundations of human knowledge do not fully coincide with this ontology.

As we will see from a number of passages, this twofold correction of the Cartesian approach is also relevant for the content of the theory of the human mind. For instance, Part Two of the *Ethics* does not simply proceed from the insight that the *cogito* is immune to doubt; it proceeds from general observations about the meaning of *cogitatio* from an ontological point of view.¹⁸ Thus, Spinoza's starting point for his theory of the human mind is also ontological, constituting what we might call an ontology of the mental. Furthermore, Spinoza's views diverge from the early Descartes in that he does not take the problem of the human mind to be exhausted by the discussion of the principles of knowledge. In addition to the ontology of the mental, there is an implicit discussion of the concept of the subject, as well as a kind of cognitive psychology.¹⁹ Finally, consider how Book Five of the *Ethics* discusses certain implications of the theory of the human mind for human happiness. Note that, while diverging from Descartes in denying the immortality of the soul, Spinoza nonetheless takes the human desire for happiness—a desire that underlies the traditional concept of beatitude—more seriously than Descartes does.

17. It is in this sense, I believe, that 2p10s brings up the proper order of philosophizing. Failure to adhere to this order does not simply mean starting with the wrong things but not accounting for how things are to be determined ontologically if we intend to treat them as parts of the discernable being of God or nature.

18. See Part II, Chapter 6. As a side note, it should be mentioned that, in his last published work, *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes increasingly turns his attention to psychological questions as well.

19. The inclusion of cognitive psychology is at the root of the reconstruction by Amann (2000), who even suggests that the *Ethics* in its entirety is an epistemology. Another justification for a similar claim can be found in Gueroult, who, although he chooses the title *L'âme* (*On the Soul*) for his reconstruction of Part Two of the *Ethics*, takes the second part to deal exclusively with knowledge (see Gueroult 1974, 9).

All these features will be discussed later, but there is one consequence of these revisions to Descartes that I would like to highlight here: as we have seen, Spinoza maintains the primacy of metaphysics over the theory of the human mind. Yet, rather than stipulating that the latter is deduced from the former, this priority claim will be of particular importance once any conflict arises between the insights of ontology and the phenomenological intuitions of our everyday self-conception.²⁰ As pointed out in the Introduction, when Spinoza discusses the concept of the human mind, he frequently refers to phenomenological facts that do not originate in his metaphysics. But the crucial question is, to what extent can Spinoza really rely on these kinds of facts? Considering the primacy of metaphysics over the theory of mind, the answer is clear: Spinoza can rely on phenomenological insights precisely to the extent to which they do not contradict positions derived from the ontological premises. But if, as occurs in contexts such as the problem of our freedom of will or that of the spontaneity of our ideas, phenomenological insights do contradict their ontological premises, then the ontology must take precedence. Thus, the primacy of metaphysics over the theory of the human mind requires that we must assimilate our phenomenological intuitions to the ontological premises and not the other way around.

We can therefore conclude that, even though Spinoza's concept of the human mind does not derive from his metaphysics in the sense that the metaphysics by itself would allow us to determine positively what the mind is, this does not weaken the universal validity of the metaphysical premises. To define the function of these premises, however, we need to refrain from insisting that absolutely everything must be *deducible from* the metaphysics and instead embrace the idea that explications of particular entities or facts must be *compatible with* the fundamental metaphysical claims. This will likely change the thrust of various propositions. Often, the crucial point is neither simply the thesis advanced nor its argument alone. What really matters is how thesis and argument come together to correct and refine our implicit understanding of certain things and facts. To be sure, the opinions we hold will not simply dissolve away, but we may have to describe and explicate them differently and refrain from drawing certain conclusions from them. According to Spinoza, anything inferred from empirical insights or phenomenological intuitions is necessarily false if it stands in conflict with the formal requirements of metaphysics.

20. Here and in the following, "phenomenological intuition" is not meant to refer to intuitive knowledge in Spinoza's sense.

The Concept of Idea and Its Logic

THE FIRST OCCASION on which Spinoza mentions events that we would call subjective experience is 2ax3. The subject matter of this axiom is the intentional structure of emotions. It argues that the occurrence of certain passions in an individual, *affectus animi*, depends on the same individual's having an idea of the object of his or her passion, whereas ideas are also conceivable without passions.¹

On the face of it, this axiom seems rather compelling, not least because it largely corresponds to our pretheoretical intuitions. Not only do we tend to explain emotions such as the grief we feel after a friend's death by assuming that we are preoccupied with this friend and his death, but we also take it for granted that our sadness would diminish, if only for the moment, if we could redirect our thoughts. Hence, we often assume that the emotions we have are linked to our thoughts. The second part of 2ax3 seems just as plausible. We can contemplate the death of a loved one without really feeling sad, for instance, if we have good reason to believe that his life is far from over and that we may yet spend many hours together.

But the provisions made in 2ax3 are more ambitious than these pretheoretical considerations would have us believe. Two things in particular must be taken into account. The first thing we need to notice about this axiom is that it makes its appearance at the beginning of Part Two of the *Ethics*, rather than Part Three, which deals with the human emotions. Obviously, despite having the intentional structure of the affects as its theme, the axiom is actually relevant for the entire theory of mind. Indeed, 2ax3 is discussed only in Part Two—it is not discussed

1. See 2ax3: "There are no modes of thinking, such as love, desire, or whatever is designated by the word affects of the mind, unless there is in the same individual the idea of the thing loved, desired, and the like. But there can be an idea, even though there is no other mode of thinking" (C I, 448; G II, 86). As will be shown later on, this axiom describes merely the structure of emotions; it does not explain their genesis. See also Part IV, Chapter 13.

at all in Part Three, where the affects are examined. Second, it is striking that the term *animus*, featured in the genitive construction, deviates from Spinoza's own technical terminology, which otherwise prefers the expression *mens*.² Apparently, 2ax3 is not directly linked to the everyday conceptions outlined above; instead, it follows the model of traditional cognitivism which describes all emotions or affects in terms of either the specific thoughts or the specific judgments involved, depending on the theory. With origins traceable to Aristotle's rhetoric,³ such cognitivism was later adopted by philosophers in a variety of traditions in order to lend plausibility to the position that emotions can be practically influenced by thought.⁴

Yet, in the seventeenth century, cognitivism was by no means exclusive to moral theories of the affects, which naturally had an interest in conceptualizing the emotions as something for which the subject is at least partly responsible.⁵ Descartes, too, who distances himself from any moral assessment of the passions,⁶ employs cognitivist descriptions of the affects in his *Passions de l'âme*—for example, when he describes sorrow as the state of mind that appears when we observe a present evil.⁷ And even Hobbes, who sought to explain the origins of the passions mechanistically, distinguishes them, in *de Homine*, not by their physiological causes but by their different intentional objects.⁸

2. In Cicero, Seneca, and Lipsius, *animus* is the prevalent term.

3. In his *Rhetoric* (2, 1, 1378a, 21), Aristotle distinguishes three aspects in the analysis of emotions: first, the condition or state of mind of the subject who is affected by, say, anger; second, the object or addressee of that anger; and finally, the reason or grounds for the subject's anger (1984, 2195).

4. The *locus classicus* for the claim that affects must be seen as cognitions is Cicero's representation of the Stoic theory of affects, in the fourth part of his *Tusculan Disputations* (1997). The claim is necessary to maintain that subjects are partly responsible for their feelings.

5. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, cognitivist conceptualizations of emotions can be found in moralists of very different persuasion. For instance, Coeffeteau's (1632, 2) and Senault's (1687 [1669], 52) definitions are very similar. More or less the same conception of emotions as representation of (supposed) evils implicitly informs Justus Lipsius' *De Constantia* (see Lipsius 1998, 44). Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to consult Ludwig Meyer's theory of affects. For moralist theories of affect in general, see Lafond 1993.

6. Moreau 2003 has shown conclusively that the philosophical discourse of feeling changes decisively with the advent of Descartes', Hobbes', and Spinoza's theories of affect.

7. See AT XI, 376, CSM I, 351: "Consideration of a present good arouses joy in us, and consideration of a present evil arouses sadness, when the good or evil is one that we regard as belonging to us."

8. See Hobbes 1991b, 55: "Emotions or perturbations of the mind are species of appetite and aversion, their differences having been taken from the diversity and circumstances of the objects that we desire or shun."

Spinoza had access to all these theories, and we can assume that 2ax is simply intended to make explicit the theoretical basis that those philosophers before him had maintained, namely that to have an emotion requires having a determinate thought by which an emotion also distinguishes itself from other emotions—whereas it is fully possible, on the other hand, to have thoughts that are not accompanied by emotions. However, seen in this light—and this is crucial—the axiom does not merely make a statement about our emotions; it also maintains, especially in its second part, the universal applicability of the concept of idea: in all our mental states, be they emotions or cognitions, ideas are in play. With this, Spinoza goes far beyond his contemporaries, who often reserved the concept of idea for rather limited areas⁹—which is remarkable, considering the seventeenth century’s reputation as a “heyday of ideas.”¹⁰ But Spinoza’s 2ax3 determines that—as far its mental side is concerned—the concept of idea can be used to describe and explicate *all* experience, *including* the emotions.

In this chapter, therefore, I discuss a number of ontological premises that are linked to Spinoza’s concept of idea. The passage at 2ax3 only expresses Spinoza’s conviction that all mental states are based on ideas. But what does that tell us about our mental states? This only becomes clear once we understand what ideas are in the first place. Now, the concept of idea is among the most difficult and most criticized concepts in the *Ethics*. Among other things, Spinoza has been accused of having ambiguous concepts of idea,¹¹ of representation,¹² and of the content of our thoughts.¹³ Various rescue efforts have been launched against objections of this kind,¹⁴ whereas the opposing side has

9. Descartes, for example, in analogous passages from the *Passions of the Soul*, refrains from using the term “ideas” (*idées*), opting instead for the term “thoughts” (*pensées*). He reserves the concept of idea for epistemological contexts. Neither does Hobbes use the term in *De Homine*. In Malebranche’s *The Search After Truth*, we find an explicit distinction between the ideas we have in God—ideas that grant us knowledge of things—and sensations underlying our affects, occurring in us independently from God.

10. See Hacking 1975, 15–16 and 163–4.

11. Pollock 1880, 145–6; Barker 1972, 142; Taylor 1972a, 206; Perler 2008, 190.

12. Bennett 1984, 153–8.

13. This is also suggested by Bennett 1984, 360, and Manning 2002. A similar objection can be found as early as Martineau 1882, 138–9.

14. See especially Radner 1971; Della Rocca 1996b, 44 ff.; and most recently Haag 2009. For a critique of Della Rocca, see Manning 2002, 207. The most exciting attempt at saving Spinoza’s conception comes from Robert Brandom, who develops Spinoza’s concept of idea further, into an inferential semantics (1994, 93). Brandom’s essay from 1976 about the third kind of knowledge already points in this direction. It is unfortunate that this essay has received so little

categorically denied the possibility of gleanings a consistent conception of idea from the *Ethics*.¹⁵

This criticism is not without merit. Seen in its entirety, the way in which the *Ethics* employs the concept of idea is indeed ambiguous. Aside from the hermeneutic effort required, this raises the question of whether we are not ultimately dealing with difficulties in the subject matter itself. It is true that Spinoza's concept of ideas is not without pitfalls. I would like here to emphasize only one point. The concept of idea, as employed in the vicinity of Descartes, suggests that there is such a thing as an elementary component of the mental, to which the notion "idea" is intended to refer. As I will show later on, there is reason to believe that Spinoza indirectly distances himself from this atomistic conception of ideas, yet without fully surrendering it. While this position may appear contradictory, it does not compel us to dismiss Spinoza's theory of idea—and with it his entire theory of the human mind—as wholly inconsistent. Granted, to identify Spinoza's positions, it is sometimes necessary to look very closely and to carefully keep track of what exactly he is talking about in any given moment. But as a designation for mental ad hoc units, be they real or possible, the talk of ideas remains unproblematic. This is true regardless of our ability to discern different aspects of these units and of the complexities they seem to yield on closer investigation.

In this context, I address three questions in a little more detail. Taking my cue from Spinoza's definition of *idea*, I first discuss what ideas are in essence—are they mental phenomena, or are they attributable to physical processes? It will be shown that when it comes to this question, Spinoza positions himself quite squarely between Descartes and Hobbes, whose dispute he likely references in his own definition (a). In a second step, I pursue the question of what we mean when we talk of the content of ideas. Unlike the ontologically equivalent concept of mode in the attribute of thought, the concept of idea stipulates that our thoughts have two sides, an act side and a content side. I submit that, according to Spinoza, we must distinguish between two theoretical points of view even when it comes to the content side (b). Third, I discuss the action-theoretical implications of Spinoza's concept of idea. To do so, I will examine Spinoza's criticism of Descartes'

attention in the literature. In contrast, Dalton's essay from 2002 shows just how fruitless it is to try and save Spinoza's concept of idea by evoking a model of "mirroring."

15. Probably the harshest criticism comes from Margaret Wilson. In her view, Spinoza's philosophy of mind yields no intelligible conception of representation whatsoever. Consequently, she considers it altogether pointless to locate a theory of the human mind in Spinoza's *Ethics* (Wilson 1999, 126 and 131–2). Admittedly, early attempts to make Part Two of the *Ethics* fruitful for questions of the philosophy of mind (Matson 1971; Odegard 1975) yielded few results.

epistemic voluntarism, which becomes the object of discussion in the last two propositions of Part Two of the *Ethics* (c).

*a) Ideas as Concepts of the Mind: The Definition
of “Idea” in Context*

What are ideas for Spinoza? A first answer to this question is provided in 2def3:

By idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing.

Exp.: I say concept rather than perception, because the word perception seems to indicate that the mind is acted on by the object. But concept seems to express an action of the mind.¹⁶

As the explanation to this definition suggests, there is more at stake in this statement than there may appear at first glance. It is not just the expression *conceptus* that hints at a more trenchant position but also the relative clause, “because [*quaeterea*] it is a thinking thing.” It stands to reason that, with both points, Spinoza positions himself toward the debate which, in the wake of Descartes’ *Meditations*, arose between Descartes and Hobbes.¹⁷ In his second objection to the *Meditations*, Hobbes had raised concerns about Descartes’ identification of *res cogitans* and human mind. In his argument, Hobbes concedes that it is perfectly correct to conclude that we are a *res cogitans*, given that we think, wake, or dream. But, for Hobbes, to qualify this *res cogitans* as mind, soul, understanding, or reason raises doubts—for is it not true that all philosophers distinguish the subject¹⁸ from its abilities and acts or from its properties and essential traits? An entity’s being (*ens*), for Hobbes, is not the same as its essence (*essentia*), which raises the possibility that the *res*

¹⁶. C I, 447, G II, 84–5.

¹⁷. Spinoza was perfectly familiar both with the various objections to the *Meditations* and with Descartes’ responses. This knowledge has found its way into many passages in his own work, as shown by Rousset 1996 and Monnoyer 2001.

¹⁸. Of course, “subject” here is not to be taken in the modern sense of the word, indicating a self-conscious entity capable of performing specific actions. Rather, the reference is to the logical–ontological concept of *subjectum*, which is both a logical subject to which properties are predicated and the ontological vehicle of these properties themselves. As for the question of congruence between logical–conceptual predication and ontological structure, Descartes, Spinoza, and Hobbes hold, at times, widely differing views. Since this is ultimately a problem of ontology, I cannot discuss this question any further within the confines of this study.

cogitans—cast as the *subjectum mentis* of understanding or reason—is actually something physical.¹⁹

Descartes reacted to this charge first by pointing out that by “mind” he did not mean the ability to think but rather the thing endowed with this ability.²⁰ As a result, Hobbes’ talk of a *subjectum mentis* now lacked a proper foundation, for only the mind itself can be spoken of as the subject of mental predicates. Second, in reference to the textual chronology of the *Mediations*, Descartes distinguished between two problems: it is one thing, he argued, to gain two distinct notions of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and a different thing altogether to clarify the relationship between these two *res*. According to Descartes, the answer to the question whether the *res cogitans* is something physical lies not in the second but rather in the sixth Meditation.²¹ Descartes explained the sequence of these two problems by suggesting that once we hold two distinct notions of the two substances, we could easily discern whether they are identical or different from one another.²²

Where does Spinoza stand on this question? Of course, he is known to disagree with Descartes in maintaining that there is only one single substance and that body and mind can therefore not relate to each other as different substances.²³ Nonetheless, he agrees with Descartes on the problem of the *subjectum* of our ideas. Definition 2def3 emphasizes that it is the mind that forms our ideas, which is why we have to attribute those ideas to it. Thus, Spinoza essentially follows the distinction Descartes draws between the problem of ascribing ideas and the mind–body problem.²⁴ Ideas are inherent within us insofar as we can understand

19. “I am a thinking thing. Correct . . . But when the author adds ‘that I, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect or reason,’ a doubt arises . . . Yet all philosophers make a distinction between the subject and its faculties and acts, i.e. between the subject and its properties and its essences: an entity is one thing, an essence another” (CSM II, 122; AT VII, 172). Note that this translation deviates from CSM in putting the definite article before “subject.”

20. “When I said ‘that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect or reason,’ what I meant by these terms was not mere faculties, but things endowed with the faculty of thought” (CSM II, 123; AT VII, 174).

21. “‘It may be,’ he says, ‘that the thing that thinks is something corporeal. The contrary is assumed, not proved.’ But I certainly did not assume the contrary, nor did I use it as the ‘basis’ of my argument. I left it quite undecided until the Sixth Meditation, where it is proved” (CSM II, 123; AT VII, 175).

22. “Once we have formed two distinct concepts of these two substances, it is easy, on the basis of what is said in the Sixth Meditation, to establish whether they are one and the same or different” (CSM II, 124; AT VII, 176).

23. See p. 78

24. For Spinoza’s take on the mind–body problem, refer also to Part II, Chapter 7.

ourselves as a *res cogitans*. But this does not imply any statement about the relation between that *res cogitans* and the human body.

Yet, Spinoza does not unequivocally side with Descartes. By choosing the term *conceptus*, whose purpose the explanation seeks to clarify, he simultaneously addresses another aspect of Hobbes' critique of Descartes. In his fifth objection, Hobbes had questioned the legitimacy of Descartes' inferring the existence of a perfect being from its idea, by challenging the conception of our ideas as "images of things."²⁵ We have no picture, and therefore no idea, of God, Hobbes tells us; we merely infer his existence, just as someone who was born blind would infer the existence of a fire from the perception of heat, along with the knowledge, gained through hearsay, of the notion "fire." Descartes countered this objection by turning the tables on Hobbes, criticizing the latter's interpretation of ideas as images—which Descartes suggested was modeled purely on the imagination rather than the mind—and contrasting it with his own abstract identification of ideas with everything perceived by the mind.²⁶ By doing so, Descartes gave his opponent a taste of his own medicine: Hobbes' theory of idea formation conceives of ideas as images of the imagination, created to counter the pressure of external affection. According to Descartes, it is this theory, and not his own, that suffers from all the deficiencies of an image-based theory.

From Spinoza's point of view, this response is correct but insufficient when it comes to meeting the crux of Hobbes' misgivings. Descartes misses the crucial objection: that he underestimates the constructive contribution of the mind in forming ideas. The objection remains, irrespective of whether or not ideas are physical pictures—which is something Spinoza will emphasize later.²⁷ Descartes'

25. At the beginning of this objection, Hobbes quotes from Descartes: "Some of these [viz. human thoughts] are, as it were, the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term 'idea' is strictly appropriate—for example, when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God" (CSM II, 25 and 126; AT VII, 37 and 179). He fails to see that when Descartes describes these ideas as images, he does so merely as a matter of comparison (*tanquam*). Furthermore, he does not take into consideration that this comparison serves to distinguish ideas from judgments and acts of volition.

26. "Here my critic wants the term 'idea' to be taken to refer simply to the images of material things which are depicted in the corporeal imagination But I make it quite clear in several places throughout the part, and in this passage in particular, that I am taking the word 'idea' to refer to whatever is immediately perceived by the mind" (CSM II, 127; AT VII, 181). In fact, Descartes' earlier explications of the concept of idea are based on the notion that things in the intellect, or being perceived by the mind, have objective being (*esse objective*). See Descartes' reply to the first batch of objections (CSM II, 74–5; AT VII, 102), as well as the definition of idea included in the short version of the *Meditations* in geometric form, following his replies to the second batch (CSM II, 113; AT VII, 160).

27. In 2p17s, Spinoza explicitly differentiates between "images of things," which consist in the body's affections, and the ideas which the mind forms of these affections. The latter not only

underestimation comes when he interprets ideas—in analogy to Augustine’s conception of the idea as an *exemplar rei* in the divine understanding—as an inner perception of the essences of things.²⁸ Not only is it true for Spinoza that ideas are not images but they are not even quasi-images, placed before our mind’s eye in an abstract and noncorporeal sense such that all one has to do is simply perceive them. By choosing the expression *conceptus* in place of Descartes’ preferred *perceptio*, Spinoza gets to the heart of this—one might say, constructivist—reservation: ideas are not simply there, as it were; they are not givens but are, from the start, *formed*.

But formed by whom or by what? Spinoza does not explicitly say so in 2def3, but it is clear that the *mens* referred to as *res cogitans* is by no means a divine, infinite intellect but the human mind. Thinking otherwise would run counter to the aforementioned anti-Platonic tendency encapsulated in the term *conceptus*. Moreover, in practically all instances where Spinoza uses the expression *mens*, he has the human being in mind, or at least finite beings similar to humans. In the whole work, 2def3 is the only passage that even raises questions of this kind. However, considering our assumption that 2def3 is meant to intervene in the debate between Descartes and Hobbes, we can confidently rule out that Spinoza had the infinite intellect in view.²⁹

We can therefore conclude that the *Ethics*, by definition, conceives of ideas as something that originates in the mind—specifically, in the human mind. The human mind—and not the infinite intellect—is the source of all ideas, insofar as they actually exist. This already suggests that Spinoza’s epistemology will be markedly different from Descartes’, for if ideas are essentially a product of the human mind, any discussion of their truth content can no longer follow Descartes’ third

affect one’s own body but also represent the external affecting body and its existence. See C I, 465; G II, 106.

28. “I used the word ‘idea’ because it was the standard philosophical term used to refer to the forms of perception belonging to the human mind” (CSM II, 127; AT VII, 181). For the tradition behind Descartes’ stance, also see Perler 1996, 63, and Halbfass 1976, 103–4.

29. Thus, ideas are not “bits of God’s omniscience”—at least not in the sense that they could be ascribed to God as an epistemic subject. The expression “bits of God’s omniscience” was, for the most part, coined by Wilson (1999, 153–4), in her criticism of Bennett’s claim that Spinoza, in 2p7dem, interprets 1ax4 as a psychological axiom (Bennett 1984, 129). Remarkably, Della Rocca (1996b, 8) employs this conception of ideas as “bits of God’s omniscience” precisely while cautioning against nonpsychological readings of the concept of idea. I think Wilson’s point deserves to be taken seriously—namely that Spinoza draws no clear distinction between logical and psychological terms. However, the metaphor of divine knowledge does nothing to illuminate the implications of this indifference. In fact, it tends to obscure them. See the next section, as well as Part III, Chapter 10, § b).

Meditation, which classifies our ideas as innate, acquired, or self-produced.³⁰ This does not preclude that the ideas we have actually contain elements of all three of Descartes' categories: "innateness" along with empirical content (i.e., acquired) and components that might be invented, "self-made," or "fictional." But in order to analyze our ideas in a way that incorporates those elements, we do not have to distinguish different, clear-cut *types* of ideas, each with a corresponding truth claim, for all ideas have the same ontological origin—the human mind.

*b) Representational Content and Epistemic
Value: The Problem of the Content of Ideas
in Spinoza*

When 2def3 characterizes ideas as concepts of the mind, this is only one side of the coin. It is just as important for understanding the concept of "idea" that ideas always have a content. In this section, I explore a twofold question that the *Ethics* never discusses in detail. How is this content ontologically related to the mental act that occurs in ideas, according to 2def3? And what is the content of our ideas, according to Spinoza?

Once again we need to begin with Descartes, just as we did in our discussion of the definition of "idea." In his *Meditations*, Descartes maintains that every idea can generally be viewed from two perspectives: we can focus either on the act we perform while having ideas or on the content that they present to us. Accordingly, we can also distinguish between two aspects in each idea, namely an act-aspect and a content-aspect or, in late scholastic parlance, a *realitas formalis* and a *realitas objectiva*.

This differentiation between two aspects within an idea should not conceal the fact that we are ultimately dealing with different possibilities of looking at mental states and not with two ontologically separate things.³¹ In other words, Descartes operates with an aspect dualism of act and content. This is the only way in which the distinction between act and content can be made plausible. On the one hand, as Descartes brilliantly demonstrates in the *cogito* argument, we can direct all our attention to the act of having ideas, and from this we can derive

30. In contrast to Marshall (2013, 50–3), I do not think that Spinoza follows Descartes in this point.

31. This, I think, is the crucial result of Perler's reconstruction: that, for all his indebtedness to Augustine and Plato, Descartes ultimately opts for an aspect dualism. See Perler 1996, 84–5, where he insists, against Kenny 1968 and Kemmerling 1996, that Descartes does not consider ideas to be mental doubles of things. In doing so, he saves Descartes from the suspicion of being inconsistent.

that we have ideas. While we are not concerned with the content of our ideas in such a case, this does not rule out that we are nonetheless dealing with ideas of something. But, on the other hand, we can also disregard the act of having ideas and focus on the content of an idea while considering it a matter of course that underlying this content is an act of a particular subject.

This aspect dualism has a meta-theoretical rationale, which Spinoza largely adopts.³² As we will see, several other conceptual pairs used in the course of the *Ethics* can be understood in an analogous fashion as signifying different aspects of one and the same thing or one and the same problem. In Spinoza, the Cartesian aspect dualism of act and content thus becomes a model for quite a few conceptual relations.³³ When it comes to the relation between the act and the content of ideas, it must be stated that the definition given above seems to be concerned only with the act side—that is, with raising and debating the issue of whose act, and what kind of act, it is—whereas the rest of the *Ethics* focuses mainly on the content of certain ideas.

In comparison to Descartes, however, Spinoza's understanding of ideas contains a further element. Whereas Descartes conceives of ideas simply as mental representations that may or may not contain epistemic content, Spinoza believes that ideas always constitute knowledge.³⁴ In the *Ethics*, the concept of idea is not simply psychological but always also epistemological.³⁵ The issue is not only that we associate ideas with *claims* to knowledge; according to Spinoza, all ideas also have an epistemic *value*, at least minimally. In this respect, Spinoza advocates a radical antiskepticism: in his opinion, we can confidently dismiss the view that our ideas lack reference to an extramental reality.³⁶ This is not to say

32. See the explanations given in Röd 2002, 199–200, and Perler 2008, 191 ff.

33. For other aspect–dualist relations, see the following passages: on the mind–body relation, Part II, Chapter 7; on the relation between truth and adequacy, Part III, Chapter 10, § b; and on the relation between idea and idea of idea, Part IV, Chapter 14, § b.

34. This is also why, in revisiting earlier propositions, Spinoza sometimes exchanges the terms “idea” (*idea*) and “knowledge” (*cognitio*) without providing any justification. See, for instance, the reference to 2p13 in 2p19: “For the human mind is the idea itself, *or* knowledge of the human body (by 2p13)” (C I, 466; G II, 108).

35. As a result, there is no consensus among Spinoza scholars as to whether the second part of the *Ethics* is an epistemology or a theory of the human mind. Whereas Curley 1969 and Gueroult 1974 interpret the part as an epistemology, Wilson (1999) and Della Rocca 1996b consider it to be a theory of the human mind (to name only a few major contributors to the debate).

36. Spinoza rarely addresses skeptical objections directly, but we can assume that antiskepticism is one of the strongest motivations behind his approach. This has been seen most clearly by Popkin (1979, 238 ff.). For a more precise analysis of Spinoza's arguments, also see Doney 1975; Odegard 1994; Della Rocca 1994, 31 ff.; Cook 2003, 66 ff.; and Perler 2007. For additional

that we are not often, or even systematically, prone to deceive ourselves about the things represented by our ideas. But that our ideas could deceive us so fundamentally that we would doubt the existence of all extramental being is, on this view, utterly impossible.

Thus, Spinoza assumes not only that ideas are acts and have content but that they are also always endowed with a more or less significant epistemic value. What implications this has for the ontology of ideas becomes clear as soon as one tries to place it ontologically. In light of Spinoza's antiscepticism, it is clear that the epistemic value—just like the content of an idea for Descartes—cannot be separated from the act of having or forming ideas. Furthermore, it seems intuitive to regard the epistemic value of an idea as something that the idea somehow possesses qua content. That we know by means of ideas has something to do with their being ideas of something. But whatever it is that they are ideas *of* is not necessarily the same as what we know through them. We can thus further distinguish, at least analytically, between two aspects on the content side. The *Ethics* does not furnish us with a terminological distinction for these two additional aspects, but for the sake of clarity, I will henceforth refer to the *representational content* and the *epistemic value* of ideas—instead of simply using the terms “content” and *realitas objectiva*. I further suggest that these two additional aspects of Spinoza's relate to the *content* of an idea in just the way Descartes takes the aspects of act and content to relate to the idea itself; that is to say, they are different aspects of the content of ideas. In other words, we could also say that Spinoza opens a second aspect dualism *within the content side*.³⁷

This second aspect dualism between representational content and epistemic value is not as implausible as it may appear at first glance. Aside from examining how we form them, we can indeed pursue two different lines of inquiry when dealing with our thoughts. For instance, when I think of the ancient tree that long ago stood outside the window of my nursery, I can try to give a precise account of how the tree looked and how its thick branches moved during violent storms. But I can also try to understand *what is real* about this memory of the old tree outside my nursery. In other words, I can ask what I know by virtue of my having the idea of this tree, and I will notice that this idea clearly shows me something that once

aspects of Spinoza's antiscepticism, see Part II, Chapter 7; Part III, Chapter 10, § b; and Part IV, Chapter 12, § a.

37. Gueroult has made a similar point, by distinguishing between distinct concepts of idea, or parallelisms (1974, 15). I find Gueroult's observations very astute, although I cannot agree with the idealist reconstruction of Spinoza to which they give rise. I'd like to thank Thomas Kisser, who, in the course of a long discussion, gave me a firmer understanding of this aspect of Gueroult's approach.

made a great impression on me—even though it may well no longer exist and even though it may never have been as great as my youthful perception had me believe. As we will see later on, Spinoza indeed analyzes ideas along the lines of these two theoretical questions.³⁸

Now, there's a catch here—a catch we can most easily illustrate by looking at the same example. Consider how I have just come to acknowledge that the epistemic value of my idea of the tree is reducible to the notion that there must have been something that once made a great impression on me. Is it not true that this epistemic value becomes clear to me only as a result of a line of reasoning *involving other ideas*—such as the idea that I myself happened to be very young and impressionable back then? In other words, is this idea's epistemic value really an aspect of a single simple idea, or are we not rather dealing with an entire complex of ideas, a complex that contains reflections as well as interior images and which has generally changed over time?

This exhibits a precarious dimension of Spinoza's concept of idea, a dimension that the *Ethics* does not sufficiently explain. We have already mentioned the twofold assumption that ideas always have an epistemic value which must be conceivable as an aspect of the content of ideas. In my view, this twofold assumption is plausible only in the context of a mental holism, which stipulates that our thoughts are always part of a veritable network of ideas, ideas that determine each other with regard to their content. If every idea has a certain epistemic value, it is because the network of our ideas as a whole opens up reality. Such a holism of ideas, however, is incompatible with the assumption of simple ideas, for what would be a simple idea in a network of this kind? How are we supposed to isolate individual ideas with this kind of approach?

Our discussion of the concept of the infinite mode has already yielded a result that will later be discussed in more detail, namely that it is indeed the case that the *Ethics* advocates a holism of the mental.³⁹ That, however, creates some tension with the assumption of simple ideas, which was fundamental for Descartes' methodological ideal.⁴⁰ On the other hand, we must remind ourselves that Spinoza distances himself from Descartes' ideal—and especially from its epistemological fundamentalism—in some crucial regards.⁴¹ Descartes had postulated that

38. See Part IV, Chapter 12, § b.

39. See Part I, Chapter 2, § d, and Part III, Chapter 10, § c.

40. See the function of Descartes' concept of intuition in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (CSM I, 14; AT X, 368) and the function of the concept of clear and distinct knowledge in his *Principles of Philosophy* (CSM I, 207; AT VIII, 21–2).

41. See Part II, Chapter 4.

all ideas should be strictly deducible from simple, intuitively graspable ideas. In Spinoza, this postulate is transformed into the claim that it must in principle be possible to explicate everything with the help of the ideas of God's essential properties. Thus, he retains only the assumption that there are more and less fundamental ideas, as well as the claim that, in principle, an intuitive knowledge of all being must be possible. We must furthermore stress that the *Ethics* uses the term *idea simplex* only to distance itself from the conception of the human mind as a simple idea.⁴²

Whether or not this reconfiguration of Descartes' approach is satisfying cannot be explored here. Some readers may think of it as only partially satisfying, given that it fails to reject outright the concept of simple ideas as meaningless. Strictly speaking, this is what Spinoza would need to do if he wanted to be consistent in his advocacy for mental holism. Yet, clearly, Spinoza cannot simply dismiss the concept of simple ideas as entirely meaningless since this would create a conflict with his realism. At this point, it is more important to emphasize that Spinoza no longer simply assumes that we have simple ideas. Or, more precisely, he does not assume that our ideas of real things are simple.⁴³ Thus, in Spinoza's mature philosophy, the notion of simple ideas actually plays the role of a limit concept, appearing on the horizon from time to time, rather than that of a methodical starting point, as was the case for Descartes. This ultimately means that Spinoza's realism—in contrast to Descartes'—depends not on our discovery of simple, indubitable ideas but on our ability to justify the claim that determinate things can in principle be known. Moreover, if the assumption of simple ideas is considered only a limit concept, then the term *idea simplex* cannot possibly refer to specific, actually given mental states anymore. In other words, the ideas that we have are no *ideae simplices*. Rather, they are comparable to merely provisionally individuated ad hoc units. The concept of idea is perfectly suited to refer to these kinds of ad hoc units. Just as we do not need to know the ultimate building blocks of the universe to practice the natural sciences, we do not need to know those of the mind to reflect on our experiences. We only need to know whereof we speak in each individual case.

To summarize, we can say that Spinoza's talk of an "idea of x" is indeed ambiguous and fraught with precarious assumptions. But that is not to say, as has sometimes been done in the past, that his theory of the human mind has no merit whatsoever. We only have to make absolutely clear what he actually

42. See 2p15: "The idea that constitutes the formal being [*esse*] of the human mind is not simple, but composed of a great many ideas" (C, 463; G II, 103).

43. As was shown in footnote 12 Chapter 4, this also isn't the case for God. Thus, uniqueness must not be confused with simplicity.

speaks about in particular passages. Moreover, we have to keep in mind that even when focusing on individual ideas, we are ultimately dealing with nodes in a net of correspondences, rather than with the fundamental building blocks of the mind.

c) *Spinoza's Epistemic Determinism: The Rejection of the Spontaneity of Fictions*

As was made clear in the introduction to this chapter, Spinoza assumes that the concept of “idea” can be used to describe all kinds of mental states. Considering this, it might seem rather counterintuitive to assume, as discussed in the previous paragraph, that all ideas have some epistemic value. It is not implausible to attribute to our perceptions and sensations (and not just to our true opinions) a dimension of knowledge. But to say the same of *all* our mental states, including fictions and hallucinations, seems rather strange—the case of emotions, at the least, warrants some caution.⁴⁴ Spinoza explicitly addresses objections of this kind in the final scholium of Part Two of the *Ethics* where—commenting on the two previous propositions—he distances himself from Descartes’ conception of error. It is worth studying this passage to see how Spinoza deals with this type of objection.

The point of departure is Spinoza’s critique of two theses from Descartes that are linked thematically.⁴⁵ It is well known that in the third Meditation Descartes distinguishes between two classes of *cogitationes*: on the one hand, there are ideas in the strict sense of the word, which consist of pure representations perceived by the understanding; on the other hand, there are thoughts that bear an emotional or volitional aspect in addition. Among the latter, he counts volitions and emotions, as well as judgments.⁴⁶ On the basis of this distinction, the fourth Meditation develops the thesis that errors arise from our making judgments about things of which we have no clear and distinct ideas.⁴⁷ The central requirement of this conception of error is an unconditional voluntarism: according to

44. Consider current discussions about the problem of cognitivism in the philosophy of emotions. Nussbaum, for instance, opts for a cognitivism that goes beyond attributing representations to emotions, claiming that emotions also carry convictions (2001, 19 ff.). De Sousa (1990, 6–7) takes a more differentiated position. For a critical view, see Landweer 1999, 15 ff.

45. For the criticism of Descartes mentioned in this passage, see also Parkinson 1954, 94; Gueroult 1974, 492; Bennett 1984, 159–60; Lloyd 1990; and—very comprehensively—Della Rocca 2003b.

46. CSM II, 25–6; AT VII, 36–7.

47. For a more comprehensive discussion of this conception of error and its epistemological foundations, see Perler 1996, 229–68.

Descartes, the reason we even have the ability to form judgments about obscure and diffuse ideas is that our understanding is finite and therefore limited, but our will is not. The will must at least potentially be infinite; otherwise, we could not conceive of it as radically free.

Spinoza clearly rejects this kind of voluntarism in 2p48 and 2p49, engaging in a double destruction of Descartes' concept of will. As a first step, in quasi-nominalist fashion, he undermines the conceptual basis for a free will understood as an absolute ability. According to 2p48, what Descartes (and his voluntarist predecessors) describe as the acts of an unconditional will are actually individual voluntary acts determined by their particular, concrete content. In a second step, 2p49 refutes the position that these acts of will differ from cognitive acts by virtue of a specifically voluntary moment.⁴⁸ Here, Spinoza maintains that, in the mind, "there is no volition, or affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea."⁴⁹ From this he concludes, in 2p49c, that "the will and the intellect are one and the same."⁵⁰

Thus, Spinoza's critique of Descartes' voluntarism has genuine implications for the theory of ideas: idea and affirmation are completely identical, and we could therefore also say that the act of forming ideas *consists in* the affirmation of a determinate content. It is not only the case that what was already stated in 2ax3—that all mental acts and states require the presence of ideas—is true. The reverse is true as well: all ideas of objects also include their respective acts of affirmation. Spinoza advocates a kind of epistemic determinism here, according to which we are never free of either affirming or withholding our approval from certain representations. While Spinoza acknowledges the possibility of adopting a critical stance toward one's own thoughts, this possibility depends on correcting these thoughts on the basis of better insights, not on deliberately withholding our affirmation, which, after all, is what ideas consist of.

It is quite telling that, in 2p49, Spinoza works with examples already present in Descartes' *Meditations* and his answers to Caterus. To explain 2p49, Spinoza employs, in 2p49dem, the example of the triangle and the sum of its angles,

48. As Macherey 1997a, 367, makes clear, this also affects the relationship between theoretical and practical functions of mental acts.

49. C I, 484; G II, 130. Since both 2p48 and 2p49 deal with the problem of human will, we may ask whether they shouldn't actually belong in Part Three. Bartuschat 1992a, 124–27 seems to think so—for him, 2p48 and 2p49 are part of the analysis of human affectivity. I doubt that these two propositions are simply intended to deny human freedom of will, seeing that their primary focus is the concept of idea. Thus, while certainly setting up the theory of affects in Part Three, they clearly belong in Part Two (see also Gueroult 1974, 488).

50. C I, 485; G II, 131.

whereas the scholium includes an alternative interpretation of the Pegasus example. In contrast to Descartes, who invoked these examples to illustrate the difference between innate and self-made ideas, Spinoza uses them to lend plausibility to the position that representation and judgment are identical. This indicates that, in developing his epistemic determinism, Spinoza has grappled intensively with Descartes' distinction between innate and fictional ideas; and we can assume that Spinoza takes important cues from Descartes in this regard.

The decisive inspiration likely came from the following property of innate ideas. According to Descartes, innate ideas always imply knowledge of their objects such that our having the idea of an essence of a thing entails that we already know those of its properties that follow from its essence. This is illustrated, in the *Meditations*, by the triangle example. Anyone who visualizes a triangle by means of geometric intuition while knowing the true and immutable nature of the triangle can deduce the sum of its angles to be 180 degrees, even though this property might not have originally been available to the senses.⁵¹ Thus, innate ideas in Descartes' sense contain more than they represent judging from their content alone. With his characterization of ideas as affirmations, Spinoza agrees with the basic idea behind Descartes' conception of innate ideas: ideas often suggest determinate conclusions, which is why it is plausible to assume that they contain more than they represent. We could also describe this property by saying that ideas impose certain inferences on us. If we have an idea of something, we accept certain conclusions while rejecting others.

But Spinoza's position differs from Descartes' in two crucial regards: first, he explains this property of ideas very differently from Descartes and, second, he assumes that, rather than being limited to a specific class of ideas, it befits all of them. In the following, I take a closer look at the implications of these differences.

It is a central provision of Descartes' conception of ideas that the said peculiarity of innate ideas—namely, that they impose specific inferences on us—cannot result from any *composition* of ideas. In his response to Caterus, Descartes compares the example of the triangle with the idea of a winged horse. He does so to show that, while these kinds of composites do occur, they can only explain

51. See the following passage from the fifth Meditation: "When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that greatest angle, and the like; and since these properties are one which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not, even if I never thought of them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me" (CSM II, 44; AT VII, 64).

arbitrary connections between representations—connections that the intellect can also dissolve again. The idea of a horse and the idea of being winged, for instance, can be separated by our understanding just as easily as it had previously joined them.⁵² This is not the case for inferences we draw from innate ideas. That the interior angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees can only be denied by someone who has no understanding of what a triangle really is and who strictly speaking has no clear and distinct idea of a triangle. Thus, the innate idea of a triangle implies *as a simple idea*—or, as Descartes also says, as a simple concept of the mind—the idea of an angle-sum of 180 degrees.

The claim that innate ideas are simple ideas is crucial for Descartes' rationalism because their simplicity, especially in imposing certain inferences on the subject, ultimately prevents us from seeing a syllogistic conclusion at work whenever we proceed from the essence of a thing to its properties. The relation established by innate ideas between the essence of things and their properties is, strictly speaking, not a logical one; it is a conceptual relation that prevails between the components of a *single* concept. Yet, a conceptual relation of this nature is of the same strict necessity as a syllogism; for the geometer, the angular sum follows just as conclusively from the concept of a triangle as a certain conclusion follows from certain premises.

Spinoza generally agrees with Descartes that we are dealing not with syllogistic conclusions here but rather with material inferences.⁵³ He further assumes, with Descartes, that these cannot be plausibly explained if we consider them to be arbitrary combinations of ideas. But, unlike Descartes, he maintains that connections between ideas are *never* arbitrary—plus, as was made clear in the previous paragraph, Spinoza is generally more guarded than Descartes when it comes to positing simple ideas. Even fictions are never pure inventions; for even when we think that we are assembling ideas, giving free rein to our imagination, we actually follow specific rules. Spinoza illustrates this, in 2p49s, with the example of Pegasus—precisely the example that Descartes had used to illustrate fictional constructions. However, Spinoza's treatment of this seemingly clear-cut

52. See CSM I; 83–4; AT VII, 117–18.

53. Thus, Spinoza's ideas cannot be compared to propositional attitudes, even though they differ from Cartesian ideas in two regards: they can refer to states of affairs as well as to things, and they entertain inferential relations to other ideas. Indeed, Spinoza's concept of modes and the way he employs it makes it difficult to draw a sharp line between things and states of affairs. But then vagueness in determining the ontological species of entities is actually a feature of everyday life, more so than we might assume at first glance. For instance, the condition of Lake Zurich in the winter of 1962–3 is still remembered as the legendary *Seegfröni* ("lake freezing")—a wonderful example of a mode. But how are we to classify this phenomenon—is it a thing, a condition, an event, a state of affairs?

case differs fundamentally from Descartes'. In lieu of the abstract thought that someone who imagines a winged horse does not at the same time accept that there is a winged horse,⁵⁴ Spinoza invokes the example of a young boy consumed by the fantasy of a winged horse.⁵⁵ In contrast to an adult philosopher engaged in thought experiments, this young boy will attribute existence to the imagined winged horse. According to Spinoza's theory of the imagination, the reason is not that the boy refrains from making a judgment about the horse's existence but that he *has to* think it exists, provided that he can imagine it and provided that none of his other beliefs speak against it.

Thus, it is *the lack of contrary convictions* that compels the boy—unlike the philosopher—to entertain the possibility that winged horses exist. Consequently, he arrives at his view that the imagined horse exists with precisely the same necessity as the geometer who derives the angular sum of 180 degrees from the idea of a triangle. In other words, the erroneous—or, as we should say in light of Spinoza's theory of error, the truncated or incomplete—idea of the winged horse just as necessarily leads to the assumption that winged horses exist as the true idea of a triangle implies the knowledge of its angular sum.

From this vantage point, we can see where the actual crux of Spinoza's epistemic determinism lies: Spinoza takes the property that Descartes had attributed to innate ideas—namely, that they compel us to make specific inferences—and attributes it to *all* ideas, even those that lead us to false conclusions. According to Spinoza, all our ideas share the trait that they compel us to draw specific conclusions that are not represented in them. However—Descartes' innate ideas aside—we do not need to be aware of this state of affairs. On the contrary, the perceived compulsion to make conscious inferences does not necessarily have anything to do with the truth of our ideas, for the property of imposing inferences also exists where random coincidences prompt a subject to associate certain ideas with others and where the subject has not yet spotted the discrepancies that appear in the thought as a result.⁵⁶ In this case, too, the transition from one idea to the next follows with necessity; and once again, it is experienced by the subject as so compulsory as to invite the conclusion that there must be a real connection.

54. See C I, 487–8; G II, 132–3. We can clearly see from this scholium that the text of the *Ethics* is ultimately the result of a semifictitious dialogue, the full version of which can only be guessed here and there. See Schnepf 1996, 131, as well as Moreau's exemplary analysis of 5p23s (1994a, 541). Spinoza derives the definition of the human mind from 2p11–2p13. As I will show later on, this derivation must also be understood as the result of an implicit dialogue.

55. See C I, 488; G II, 134.

56. For the relationship between truncated ideas and associations, see Part IV, Chapter 12, §§ b and c.

Thus, whether or not we arrive at true insights ultimately depends on how complete, and how unencumbered by associations, the underlying ideas are. If our ideas are mutilated or “falsely wired,” we will draw the wrong conclusions from them; but if they are complete and if their relationship to other ideas has been made lucid, then we will arrive at the right results. The perceived compulsion to infer, however, is *indifferent to truth*.⁵⁷

This confirms what we noted earlier, during the analysis of 2def3: Spinoza’s concept of idea is an attempt to integrate genuinely rationalist influences with genuinely empiricist influences. By attributing to *all* ideas a property that Descartes had considered exclusive to innate ideas, Spinoza banishes all spontaneity and arbitrariness from the realm of human thought. Where we imagine ourselves free, we do not fantasize randomly and freely, for in those instances the property of ideas to impose specific inferences on the subject is simply at work behind our backs. On the one hand, this leads to a more radical form of rationalism since we can now assume that the realm of ideas—and keep in mind that, for Spinoza, all mental states are based on ideas—contains no absolutely inexplicable gaps. On the other hand, Spinoza also sides with the empiricist critics of Descartes’ doctrine of innate ideas, insofar as the necessity that we take ourselves to perceive when we make inferences can just as well be due to external causes; it does not have to be proof that the content of our ideas coincides with the matter at hand.⁵⁸

This also illustrates the point made above about Spinoza’s motivation to take the ontology of the mental as his point of departure: he tends to be skeptical when it comes to drawing conclusions from phenomenological considerations.

57. 2def4 says that ideas are adequate on account of an intrinsic property. But what is the nature of that property? Here, we get a first clue: ideas are adequate not by virtue of some sensation of evidence but because of their coherence with the entire network of ideas. Our discussion of 2p11c will show this more clearly (see Part III, Chapter 10, § b). Consequently, a reflecting subject can recognize associative transitions as such and correct them—even though associative transitions occur with the same necessity as material inferences. There is one requirement, however: the subject must have access to alternative ideas, ideas suggesting a correction. In other words, suffering can be a reason for cognitive therapy.

58. Spinoza’s epistemology is clearly inspired by Hobbes’ empiricism—there have been early warnings against neglecting this fact (see Hampshire 2004 [1951], 91–2). However, if we look at the way in which these empiricist inspirations are used, it becomes clear that they actually support Spinoza’s rationalist intuitions when it comes to attempted explanations of the mental. Deleuze gives a nice description of Spinoza’s attitude toward empiricism: “One of the paradoxes of Spinoza—and this is not the sole instance in which we will see it at work—is to have rediscovered the concrete force of empiricism in applying it in support of a new rationalism, one of the most rigorous versions ever conceived” (1992, 1968, 149). Note that this interpretation is hardly compatible with an interpretation of Spinoza’s rationalism in terms of Cartesian innateness, as it is defended by Marshall 2013, 50–3.

Descartes had approached the Pegasus example from a phenomenological or internal perspective, making it an object of introspection. One of the crucial aspects of Spinoza's treatment of the same example, however, is that he subjects it to a psychological analysis that can only be made from the perspective of an external observer. By doing so, he arrives at an explanation for Descartes' phenomenological findings that differs from that proposed by Descartes. There is something systematic about this procedure. While Spinoza tends to be skeptical toward phenomenological intuitions, he never simply dismisses them; instead, he tries to reinterpret them and to explain how these kinds of intuitions come about. In the course of such reinterpretation, certain elements of these intuitions are typically affirmed, whereas any overgeneralizing theoretical conclusions that may be drawn from a phenomenological perspective are also corrected. This strategy has a dramatic effect: even if the analysis is not always fully convincing, Spinoza creates a situation where seemingly evident assumptions are cast into doubt. If we seriously consider the case of the young boy imagining a winged horse, for instance, we have to admit the following: there *may be* objective relations corresponding to our perceived compulsion to draw conscious conclusions—but there certainly *do not have to be*.

The Justification of a Realist Rationalism

WHEN WE TRY to understand another person's experience, we usually rely on a number of ontological assumptions. First, we generally assume that the experience we seek to understand or explain is in some way "real." We do so even when we seek to explain behavior that strikes us as strange or absurd at first. For instance, we may find it absurd that someone remains in deep mourning for many years after the death of a cat. Yet, we will think that something must be significant about this long-lost cat. Second, we assume that the experience of others is generally accessible to us. Their reactions may seem very strange indeed—but we assume that their experience can be explained if we inquire into the causes and background of their reactions. In our attempts at an explanation, we, third, presume that we can *more or less* approximate the real state of affairs and that there is only one complete and truthful description of that state of affairs.

It is instructive to see how the first few propositions of *de Mente* relate to this problem; their purpose is to explicate, on a fundamental level, the implicit assumptions from which we proceed in these kinds of situations. In a first step, the preliminary yet crucial point is made that thought (and, by analogy, extension) is an attribute of God. As a result, thought is assigned an incontestable role within the ontological framework of Spinoza's approach. More than that, though, the status of thought as an attribute of God also guarantees that our ideas—which, according to 2ax3, form the basis for all our experiences—exist in reality (2p1). In a second step, the existence of an idea of God is inferred, which demonstrates that all being is in principle intelligible (2p3). Finally, in a third step, it is maintained that God's idea—and thus the very concept of reality—is unique (2p4).

In the following, I explicate this in more detail. I proceed from an assumption we have already discussed above, namely that these propositions say nothing about God's properties; they actually advance ontological tenets about the

fundamental constitution of being. While this assumption poses a significant hermeneutic challenge, it makes other difficulties disappear. For instance, Spinoza can no longer be accused of positing that thought is an attribute of God while refusing to grant him an intellect prior to the level of infinite modes.¹ On the other hand, all those theses that operate with the concept of God in a seemingly traditional fashion lose their casual meaning. If “God” no longer refers to a quasi-personal, intelligent entity, what exactly is it supposed to mean that thought is an attribute of God or that God has an idea of himself and everything following from himself?

My analysis will point to an alternative interpretation of the assumptions, now apparently meaningless, that thought is a divine attribute and that God has an idea of himself. In fact, these assumptions establish, as it were, the ontological foundations on which we rely whenever we seek to explain an instance of experience and expect, in a realist manner, that we can do so. To that purpose, I will first focus on the concept of attribute (a). Then, I will discuss the two related claims that an idea of God exists (b) and that this idea is unique (c).

a) Thought as an Attribute: On the Reality of the Mental

The view that thought is an attribute of God plays a crucial role within the train of thought in the first few propositions of Part One. By positing this attribute, Spinoza not only justifies the assumption of an *idea Dei* (albeit in a somewhat problematic fashion)²—he also creates the precondition for rejecting any causal interaction between thought and extension (as we can see from his use of the concept of “attribute” in 2p6dem).³ The view that thought is an attribute makes it possible to conceive of the mental world, too, as causally closed—and not just the physical world, as is often asserted today. This view requires, however, that 2p1 formulates a genuinely ontological thesis, not a theological one. According

1. For this objection, see Kammerer 1992, 22. In his theological reading of the *Ethics*, Kammerer reflects on the fact that Spinoza understands the *idea of God* as a mode of the attribute *thought*—instead of claiming the opposite, i.e., that thought is the product of a divine intellect. Kammerer interprets this in a purely negative way, namely as a means to rule out a personal God (249). Hubbeling (1977, 595–6) also assumes that Spinoza’s God is self-conscious (albeit in a rather weak fashion), as does Wilbur 1976.

2. See this Chapter, § b.

3. Here, Mattern’s index is imprecise. Although 2p1 is not mentioned explicitly, it obviously functions as a premise. Since 2p5dem refers to 2p3dem, 2p1 is also present. Thus, the index should include 2p1 in parentheses.

to this view, it is not Spinoza's aim to ascribe to God the property of thought; rather, he seeks to prove that thought is a fundamental feature of being. We can confirm this view by perusing 2p5 and 2p6, in which propositions the concept of attribute plays a prominent role. The crucial point these propositions bring out is not that God is endowed with the property of thought but that thought has an irreducible ontological status.

But what about 2p1 itself? Is the interpretation that this proposition is significant primarily from an ontological point of view really supported by the formulation of 2p1 and its argument? It seems to me that we have good reasons to read this proposition in an ontological vein, even though 2p1d may not be fully satisfactory on that account. Let us first consider the exact phrasing, "Thought is an attribute of God, or God is a thinking thing."⁴ There is something peculiar about the structure of this proposition: it consists of two phrases, which according to the conjunction *sive* are meant to be equivalent—and yet, the two phrases have different grammatical subjects. This combination—an apparent equivalence accompanied by a change of subject—leaves open which of the two expressions, *cogitatio* or *Deus*, is the actual topic of the proposition. This raises the question whether we are dealing with a thesis about God here or with a thesis about the nature of thought—or, more precisely, of *our* thought.

There is a certain logic behind this lack of clarity. Not only does 2p2 contain exactly the same construction, but it should also be noted that 2p1d consistently operates with both possibilities—*cogitatio* and *Deus*—in the subject position, thus extending the vagueness of the proposition to the demonstration. In the same vein, it is enlightening that Spinoza gives the a priori proof for 2p1 only later in 2p1s, which seems to suggest that he considers it of secondary importance.⁵ There, the possibility of conceiving of an infinite thinking being gives rise to the claim that thought is one of God's attributes. It seems difficult to read this proof without placing God—or the infinite thinking being—in the center (and, thus, the subject position) of the statement.

Overall, it almost appears as if Spinoza would like to dispel the impression—as intuitive as it may seem—that God's thought is the subject matter at hand. Earlier, I expressed the view that Spinoza's metaphysics is a general ontology

4. C I, 448; G II, 86.

5. I disagree with Gueroult 1974, 49, who claims that the argument of 2p3d makes use of 2p1s (instead of 2p1). In my view, the scholium is merely of secondary importance for Spinoza's argument.

rather than a rational theology. Now, we get some confirmation for this view from a number of single, seemingly unambiguous theological statements. We can at least assume that the actual goal of 2p1 is not to ascribe the attribute of thought to God but to establish that thought is an attribute of the single substance—which makes thought a feature of reality that is justified in itself. This is corroborated by our previous assumption that, as an attribute, thought must be causally closed. If thought is conceived of as an attribute itself, then it may not originate from other attributes.

But what, we may ask, is the meaning of this thesis—that thought is an attribute—aside from the argumentative function just mentioned? What does it mean for something to be an attribute?

At this point, I will neither give a detailed account of the definition of attribute nor revisit the research that has been done on this issue.⁶ Instead, I shall address these questions by taking a closer look at Spinoza's reference to 1p25c in the first sentence of 2p1d. This allows us to illustrate a few things without looking at 1def4, which has proved notoriously open to contradictory interpretation. To begin with, note that 1p25c does not directly deal with attributes; it rather states how particular things, *res particulares*, are to be defined within the ontological framework laid out by the metaphysical vocabulary of Part One. Particular things are described as "modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way."⁷ In 2p1d, Spinoza applies this definition to singular thoughts, *cogitationes*, concluding a posteriori (with the help of 1def5) that God, too, must have an attribute called *cogitatio*. This move is facilitated by the double meaning of the Latin *cogitatio*, which is both a verbal noun and a term signifying singular thoughts. *Cogitationes* are thus understood as modes, or particular entities, which express the attribute referred to by the verbal noun *cogitatio*.

6. There are various points of contention arising from the vague definition of the term "attribute." 1) According to 1def4, whose essence is constituted by God's attributes—God's own or that of our human comprehension? 2) Do the attributes dissimulate this essence, or do they make it knowable? 3) Who perceives the attributes—the infinite or the human intellect? (For these questions, see Haserot 1972a and b and Schnepf 1996, 241 ff.) But even independently of 1def4, Spinoza's concept of attributes frequently gives rise to discussion. 4) There is a debate, for instance, about how many attributes God has—aside from the fact that humans can know only two (see Wolf 1972; and Bennett 1984, 75 ff. 5) There is also the problem of the precise character of the attributes (see Becher 1905; Wolf 1972; Haserot 1972a and b; Deleuze 1968, 36–7; Bennett 1984, 60–1, and 1994; Wilson 1999).

7. 1p25c: "Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way" (C I, 431; G II, 68).

Let us now consider the relationship between modes and attributes underlying 1p25 in more detail. In particular, three structural features are to be emphasized:

1. From a formal point of view, we are dealing with a relationship between *three* terms that cannot be reduced, without a significant loss of differentiation, to a relationship between two terms. By expressing attributes, modes exhibit something pertaining to God's nature, not to their own. If we were to reduce the three-term relationship to that between the modes and the substance, we would have to revise the assumption, discussed above, that Spinoza rejects both an inherent and a direct causal relation between modes and substance.⁸ Reducing it to the relation of modes and attributes, on the other hand, would mean jettisoning this differentiation between the nature of God and the nature of modes. Finally, any reduction to the relation of substance and attribute would eliminate the term that stands for singular things, which would thereby completely lose their place in Spinoza's ontology.
2. So from a formal point of view, the relationship consists of three related terms; yet only two of them, namely mode and substance/God, can actually be *qualified as entities*. The attribute exists only insofar as it exists *within* an entity; it is identified with a feature of this entity, be it explicitly or implicitly.⁹ Whenever the term "attribute" appears by itself in the text, it always stands for the attributively specified substance. This is why, in 2p1, where Spinoza talks about specific attributes for the first time, he cannot dispense with the genitive attribute "of God," despite his overall metaphysical approach. Attributes are properties that are attached to something else—something that essentially displays these properties while not being fully characterized by them.
3. The formulation that singular things are modes *expressing* God's attributes carries an *implicitly realist claim*. Spinoza nurtures something like a kind of structural realism here. It is crucial to note, though, how exactly the concept of attribute is put into play. By describing something as a mode of some attribute, we do not classify it as a kind of object—that is what the categorical distinction between modes and substance is for—but we point to some dimension of being that can be identified in what we describe thus. Attributes, in other words, do not constitute highest genera or class terms, with modes as their specimens—they always have a *fundamentum in re*.

8. See Part I, Chapter 2, 3 c.

9. For a more precise analysis, see Schnepf 1996, 167–8 and 242–3.

Against the backdrop of these observations, we are now in a better position to say what is behind the notion that thought and extension are attributes of God. It is obviously a matter of identifying fundamental ontological features by which being is realized. Attributes are not independent entities but rather properties within things. As such, they are real and more than just subjective perspectives on things.¹⁰ They occur *within* entities, and, as the proof for 2p1 shows, they must even occur within singular things, for otherwise, they could not be identified in them. Thus, even if cogitation is an attribute of the substance in the first place, it is no less possible that it is also a property of singular things. On the other hand, we must stress that singular things are not sufficiently determined by attributes.

The latter point is significant, considering the implicit thematic structure of Spinoza's philosophy of mind: by characterizing thought as an attribute, he actually says nothing about the individuation of singular thoughts. Further specifications are required for that. We must be able to say what a given thought is about, and we must be able to determine the bearer of the thought. An ontological statement to the effect that thoughts are modes within the attribute of thought will be unable to provide this information.

Still, the view that thoughts are modes within the attribute of thought is not an empty formula. It may be a merely preliminary statement, but it is not without relevance. If nothing more, it rules out the following conclusions: if something is a mode in the attribute of thought, it cannot be a mode in any other attribute. Even outside of Spinoza's terminological approach, this is more informative than it may appear at first glance. Confronted with a particular thought, we can very well reach the verdict that it is simply a thought. In doing so, we make a preliminary yet potentially quite meaningful statement about the nature of our affection. For instance, if an acquaintance asks me about my subdued mood in the last few days, I can be evasive by saying: "Well, I'm troubled by certain thoughts." This reveals nothing about my reasons for feeling subdued—but it tells my acquaintance where he would have to look if he were to pursue the matter any further. He can learn from my response that I am neither sick nor simply tired but that there are very specific thoughts—which are perfectly well known to me—that I hold responsible for causing my current condition. That is why we would consider it inappropriate if someone were to react to my statement by recommending a good doctor or certain vitamin pills.

This example can serve to illustrate yet another implication of the relationship between substance, attribute, and mode. Since attributes are real properties

10. That is to say, I consider attributes to be objective (see the second question mentioned in footnote 6). This is not the same as claiming that they can exist by themselves. It is possible to think of attributes as real properties while maintaining that they are always attached to something else.

that can be identified in particular things, they can also be appealed to, to undergird assumptions concerning the reality of things. If we address something as a mode within the attribute of thought, we acknowledge that this thought is something real, regardless of its concrete content. In other words, the thought itself is real, and yet there is no guarantee that the same goes for that which it represents. When I tell my acquaintance that I am “troubled by certain thoughts,” I invite her to make a very similar assumption of reality. I let her know that she was quite right in suspecting that something was wrong with me, and, in the majority of cases, she will keep assuming that the reasons for my current disposition are real. And depending on how well she knows me, she will show some understanding and leave me be, ask me if I want to talk about it, or invite me to the movies. And her reactions are perfectly justified since my tentative mentioning of troubling thoughts refers to something that can truly be the case and that thus belongs to reality, so to speak. It is part of reality that people have thoughts, just as much as it is part of reality that there are extended bodies. We can therefore also think of thought and extension as *ways for things to be real*.

In summary, we can say that by positing an attribute of thought, Spinoza names a fundamental property of being, meaning that things that display this property can in principle be considered real. Yet, this omits the question of how particular thoughts are individuated or distinguished from each other. This is not an arbitrary omission, for the individuation of thoughts is not an ontological issue but concerns the semantic constitution of content and the attribution of content to particular epistemic subjects. That Spinoza keeps these two theoretical dimensions strictly apart is, I think, a masterstroke of the *Ethics*. It is one thing to provide a general argument for the notion that thought is a fundamental way of being real, but it is another thing altogether to discuss the conditions for individuating particular thoughts. Indeed, it is this that—later and via additional premises—enables him to solve the other two fundamental problems of his theory of the human mind, namely the issues of the numerical difference between subjects and of the laws governing the constitution of mental content. And this is ultimately what allows him to take the phenomenological and empirical dimensions of experience seriously, without abandoning the expectation that experience is generally explainable.

b) The Assumption of an idea Dei: Intelligibility as a Property of Being

After thought has been exposed as a basic ontological feature or way of being, 2p3 advances a thesis that no longer serves to prove the reality of mental life. Instead, it justifies a claim no less crucial for Spinoza’s rationalism: that being is *universally, comprehensively*, and thus *completely* intelligible. Among other things,

this claim entitles us to believe that the experience of others is in principle explainable. The proposition reads, "In God there is necessarily an idea, both of his essence and of everything which necessarily follows from his essence."¹¹ In contrast to 2p1, which advances the view of thought as an attribute, it is much easier to translate this third proposition into a general ontological statement, for if we take its phrasing at face value, Spinoza admittedly asserts that *there is in God* an idea of his essence and of everything that follows from him; but this idea is not attributed to God as its epistemic subject. Note that similar formulations are quite frequent in the *Ethics*: when Spinoza says that the ideas of certain things are in God, it is often to raise the possibility that certain things or events can be known or can become the object of thought.¹² Any statement to the effect that this or that idea is in God is meant as a statement about the intelligibility of this or that thing under these or those circumstances. By no means is it meant as a reference to a mental event in God's mind. And 2p3 can be understood in a similar vein, namely as an assertion that being is in principle knowable. Interpreted in this way, 2p3 leaves the question of an epistemic subject completely aside while focusing exclusively on the object of ideas.

One could object that the statement "there is an idea of x" is meaningful only if there is also an epistemic subject to which the idea of x can be attributed. Would that not also apply to the idea of God mentioned in 2p3? Since God never appears as an epistemic subject in our reading of the *Ethics*, and of 2p3 in particular, are we not at risk of destroying the very foundation of Spinoza's approach by rendering meaningless the claim that there is an idea of God?

We can react to this objection on two levels. First, it strikes me as doubtful that Spinoza would agree that any meaningful talk of ideas requires a subject that actually has these ideas. Granted, the definition of *idea* in 2def3 stresses that ideas are formed by a *res cogitans*, which presupposes the existence of an epistemic subject.¹³ And yet, this definition is meant as a contribution to a very specific discussion. As set out above, this is Spinoza's reaction to the debate between Descartes and Hobbes about the nature of the thing considered the very subject of ideas; 2def3 is Spinoza's answer to the question of whether ideas can be considered a product of the body.¹⁴ But can we not dismiss this reference to a subject if we were to focus on the relation between ideas and their object? In my view, nothing prevents us from inquiring into the object of our ideas, while setting aside the

11. C I, 449; G II, 87.

12. For example, consider 2p9c or 2p20.

13. "By idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing" (C I, 447; G II, 84).

14. See Part II, Chapter 5, § a.

question of who or what it is that has these ideas—in fact, I find this perfectly legitimate. Many passages in the *Ethics* that refer to the idea of this or that thing only make sense if we read them as responding to the problem of the intelligibility of the assumed objects; they inquire into the possibility of there being an idea of a given thing, without claiming that some epistemic subject actually has this idea.

But is it really Spinoza's intention to abstain from positing an epistemic subject that actually has the idea of God? And, even more importantly, could he do so if he wanted to? To solve this question, we must take a closer look at 2p3d, which is where, in marked contrast to the proposition itself, Spinoza does seem to address God as an epistemic subject. Harking back to 2p1, 2p3d reformulates the claim that thought is an attribute of God by stating that God can think infinitely many things in infinitely many modes. This quite clearly refers to the concept of an infinite agency, with God as the only conceivable infinite agent.

But this idea, instead of being a theological statement in the strict sense, can also be applied to the question of whether being itself is intelligible. Consider what we do when we ask ourselves whether something—for instance, the sum total of all casualties at the Battle of Waterloo—can be discerned? In those cases, we tend to prescind from any empirical circumstances that might limit our understanding and make it impossible to provide a definite answer to the query. Instead, we may ask ourselves whether the matter at hand is actually of the kind that any statement about its being knowable (or unknowable) can be meaningful. In 2p3, we encounter this same procedure, albeit on a more generalized level. The proposition does not simply deal with the issue of how a particular object can be known (provided we prescind from this or that empirical restriction); rather, it seeks to answer the question of how the entire spectrum of intelligible being can be determined, disregarding any and all empirical limitations. To that purpose, Spinoza evokes the notion of a thinking thing whose cognition knows no empirical limitations of any kind; this thing, he says, has an idea of the essence of everything that is, including everything that follows from this essence. Thus, he indirectly maintains here that the spectrum of all intelligible being is coextensive with being in general. In other words, the notion of divine agency is meant to present the proof that, from a universal point of view, everything is intelligible.

Two objections could be made against this interpretation. On the one hand, it could be considered problematic from an exegetical point of view that the self-referentiality alleged in the idea of God is lost. As a matter of fact, 2p3 describes the *idea Dei* not merely as an idea of the essence of everything that is but as an idea God *has* of his own essence. If we look at 2p3d, however, we realize that this self-referentiality is simply an implication of Spinoza's substance monism, not an independent feature of thought itself. The other objection is more serious, being

concerned with the difficulties raised by our reference to an absolute or divine point of view. To talk of an absolute point of view is rather bizarre, given that viewpoints, standpoints, or perspectives are by definition tied to specific places.¹⁵ One could therefore object that it is actually impossible to abstract from any and all empirical restrictions and still adopt a viewpoint. This objection would surely have merit—if it were truly the case that 2p3 talked about *adopting* this point of view. But Spinoza does something else here: he does not attribute the idea of God to any subject, but he merely says that there is an idea of God *in* God, which in my opinion amounts to a statement about general intelligibility and not about factual knowledge. From a purely procedural point of view, this is very plausible: let us assume that we are in an epistemically precarious situation, trying to justify that something can in principle be known. Would we not, in one way or another, have to take recourse to the idea of a subject untethered from any empirical limitations?¹⁶ Thus, when Spinoza talks of what God can think by virtue of the attribute of *cogitatio*, his primary goal is to justify the assumption that being is universally intelligible—that is, that being can, in principle, be known.¹⁷ His goal is not to establish God as an omniscient epistemic subject who is factually endowed with knowledge.

This interpretation has several advantages. First, it is compatible with Spinoza's radical critique of anthropomorphism—more compatible than the claim that 2p3 features a divine epistemic subject. It is not by accident that the scholium to 2p3 contains yet another vehement denial of any anthropomorphic understanding of God's power.

This interpretation also sheds some light on later applications of 2p3¹⁸; it is especially useful for understanding the arguments in 2p20 and 5p22. Proposition 2p20d evokes 2p3 in support of the notion of the human mind's self-knowledge. According to my interpretation here, this proposition does not yet address the issue of the mind's actual self-awareness. On the contrary, 2p23 makes it clear that the mind does not know itself unless it perceives the ideas of the affections of the human

15. It is no accident that Thomas Nagel, in a similar context, has coined the metaphor of a "view from nowhere." See his remarks in Nagel 1986, 5 and 9.

16. Here, it is helpful to cast a side glance at Michael Dummett, who describes the distinction between realism and antirealism as follows: the realist thinks that states of affairs are intelligible, even if the knowledge-seeking subject is merely a hypothetical one, whereas the antirealist recognizes intelligibility only if something can be known by us (Dummett, 1978, 24 and 155). If we consider 2p3 in this context, its realist intention becomes apparent.

17. In this claim—that being is universally intelligible—Spinoza's realist rationalism differs from Nagel's approach, which concedes not only that there are things of which we have no concept but also that there are things of which we *cannot* have any concept. See Nagel 1986, 90 ff.

18. Namely, the proofs of propositions 2p5, 2p9c, 2p20, 2p24, as well as 5p22 and 5p35.

body, which means that our actual self-awareness may be limited. What Spinoza says in 2p20, then, is that we must *in principle* be capable of forming a reflexive idea of the human mind—or, in general terms, of all the ideas we have.¹⁹ Thus, 2p20 presents an epistemological option that constitutes a fundamental possibility of human thought—an option that may never be fully instantiated in anybody's thought. Proposition 2p3 plays a similar role in 5p22d, which maintains that in God there is an idea *sub speciem aeternitatis* of the essence of the human body. This idea, too, is presented merely as an epistemological possibility and not as an actual, psychically instantiated process. In both cases, the claim that there is an idea of God is used to assert the intelligibility of objects—objects that are not simply known or with respect to which it is not even clear *how* they could be known.²⁰ Thus, Spinoza's claim that ideas of objects such as these are part of the *idea Dei* enables him to insist that things and facts are knowable even in cases where we have a hard time fully realizing this knowledge.

In summary, we can state that, when Spinoza proclaims an idea of God, he has something different in mind from divine self-consciousness. He merely exposes the ontological preconditions for insisting, even in the face of epistemological difficulties, that the things we want to know can in principle be known. Thus, the role played by the idea of God could almost be called transcendental, seeing that it ensures the possibility of knowledge on a very fundamental level. Yet, whereas Kant's anchoring device is epistemological, Spinoza's is ontological.²¹ In other words, Spinoza does not rely on the notion of a transcendental subject or the way it constitutes the objects of thought; he shows that, given the framework of his ontology, all being can in principle—that is, discounting all empirical restrictions

19. See also Part IV, Chapter 14, § b.

20. The other references to 2p3 largely work in a similar way. An exception is 5p35, which says that "God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love"—a claim that strikes me as incompatible with a strictly ontological reading of the concept of God. This poses no real danger for an ontological reconstruction. Part One of the *Ethics* does not—at least in terms of proof—depend on 5p35; moreover, the theological notion of God's love is apparently based on ethical concerns: it forms the basis for identifying virtue and happiness. Even Spinoza's ethics is affected only in one aspect, namely the question of human happiness or, more to the point, the possibility of blessedness. The conception of a rational way of life remains unaffected, as does the problem of human freedom. Thus, if Spinoza can be accused of something, it is only that he promises too much by opening up the prospect of blessedness (see the Conclusion).

21. In this regard, my reconstruction differs from Bartuschat's, who also—implicitly—seems to read the *Ethics* along the lines of a transcendental approach, while placing more emphasis on the human ability to be rational (see Bartuschat 1992a, esp. X). In his review, Kisser (1995, 237) draws attention to this transcendental–philosophical dimension of Bartuschat's approach, and he criticizes it by saying that the concept of substance must be understood as a theory of an absolute object. Note that this does not contradict our assumption that the idea of God fulfills a quasi-transcendental function.

that impose themselves on concrete subjects—be known. If Spinoza's assumption of an *idea Dei* addresses a question, it is not "how do we have to conceive of epistemic subject to allow for the possibility of knowledge?" but rather "what does the ontological scope of knowledge have to be if we want to prevent someone from evoking our factual ignorance in order to drown us in skepticism about the possibility of knowledge?"

*c) Necessity, Infinity, Uniqueness: From the Notion
of Intelligibility to the Concept of Knowledge*

As the previous remarks have shown, Spinoza's rationalism does not revolve around the commitment to a specific concept of rationality; it revolves instead around the assumption that everything that is or that happens is universally, comprehensively, and thus completely intelligible. This assumption prevents any kind of skepticism and thus any kind of *asylum ignorantiae*. In other words, we are dealing with a conception of being as something that is in principle intelligible. Despite its ontological props, however, this kind of rationalism still requires certain assumptions as to how actual knowledge of being should be conceived. What is needed, in other words, is a concept of knowledge that would be compatible with the claim that being is intelligible.

Let us now consider Spinoza's account of an *idea Dei* against this background. Three points strike us here:

1. We must assume that the acts by which we come to know any fact or thing are subject to *the same necessity* as the causal generation of other events. In other words, the process of knowing is just another determined and conditioned event. This is not of merely psychological importance. Its real significance lies in ensuring that knowledge is not an arbitrary result of cognitive activities. According to Spinoza, there is no fundamental difference between the act of knowing and the falling darkness after sunset. On the contrary, if the relevant conditions are met, we must assume that someone really has a specific insight. Now, like so many things in the *Ethics*, this claim appears in the guise of Spinoza's ontological terminology. In concrete terms, the assumption that knowledge is necessary is couched in the claim that the idea of God is itself subject to God's power. That is why this idea is "merely" a mode. Thus, the idea of God is not an absolute entity but is itself a conditioned entity.
2. The claim that being is universally intelligible implies that, in principle, our knowledge has no limitation. Knowledge must be potentially infinite—just as being itself is potentially infinite. This property, too, derives from the ontological status of the idea of God—in just the same way as knowledge is subject

to natural necessity. This is expressed by the notion that the idea of God immediately follows from the attribute of thought, which makes it an unlimited entity—an *infinite* mode. That is not to deny that *our* knowledge is *actually* limited. We have already seen that the universal intelligibility of being does not preclude the possibility that certain things are unknown at certain times or if considered from a certain viewpoint. By the same token, the claim that knowledge is potentially infinite does not preclude the possibility that human knowledge is actually limited. Spinoza, therefore, does not deny that there are many things we do not know yet and—depending on the situation—simply cannot know yet. What he does deny is that these kinds of situations should be the yardstick for measuring the possibility of human knowledge. In this sense, the idea of God represents the universal intelligibility of being and thus sets a norm for our epistemic quests—and it fulfills this purpose regardless of the actual extent of our knowledge.²²

3. If we insist that—empirical difficulties that hamper our epistemic efforts aside—everything can, in principle, be known, we will not be satisfied with just our being able to understand certain aspects of things; we will also assume that every question has only one correct answer. This means that every object has one, and only one, complete, distinct, and true idea that corresponds to it. Later on, in my discussion of Spinoza's epistemology, I will discuss what this means for the evaluation of factually given ideas.²³ At this point, I just want to show that even this implicit norm is anchored in the idea of God or, more specifically, in the notion established in 2p4 that the idea of God must be unique. Interestingly, this proposition has its roots in the substance monism of Part One—and thus in the claim that there can only be one reality. In 2p4, Spinoza attributes the very same property that qualifies reality—uniqueness—to the idea of God. When defending substance monism, this property was maintained on an ontological level—that is, it was meant to describe a structural feature of reality. And now, when applied to the idea of God, it is being used to set a norm. This move makes perfect sense: if we assume that there is only one reality, then we also commit ourselves to the view that there is only

22. For Brandom (1994, 93), the “order and connection of ideas” has a normative character, which plays a role in conceptual questions; and he complains that classical rationalism fails to assess this normative character correctly. In my view, this is because he misjudges what Spinoza (and, to an extent, Leibniz) means when he talks about divine knowledge. On the other hand, it is true that classical rationalism does not provide a fully fledged theory of the emergence of epistemic normativity. With regard to Spinoza, there are good reasons for that: as I have shown in Renz 2009a, Spinoza considers epistemic normativity to be irreducible—as opposed to moral normativity, for which he does indeed provide a genetic explanation.

23. See Part IV, Chapter 14, § a.

one correct notion of reality. That is not to deny that there are various epistemic approaches to reality. It merely denies that there are various, substantially different, complete instantiations of knowledge about any given object.

Thus, it is in more than one respect that the idea of God forms the basis for Spinoza's subsequent discussion of the principles of human knowledge. By asserting that being is in principle intelligible, it provides the *ontological* ground for any knowledge. It also motivates the possibility of a *descriptive* approach to human understanding, by proving that knowledge is governed by necessity. Finally, because it embodies (so to speak) the universal and complete knowledge of being, its purpose is to *set a norm*. It remains to be seen how Spinoza's epistemology combines these different perspectives. We can already suspect, however, that he will not restrict his inquiry to one of them; he will not be satisfied with the analysis of the formation of ideas alone, nor will he content himself with the evaluation of the epistemic validity of our ideas.

That said, we can already emphasize one crucial aspect related to these coexisting different perspectives: as the idea of God expresses Spinoza's commitment to a realist *rationalism*, this commitment does not imply any statement about the contents of any actual process of human cognition. Thus, Spinoza's realism is a version of neither a direct nor an indirect realism, as we would call it today. In other words, while acknowledging that all our ideas express some reality and thus have a minimal epistemic value,²⁴ he withholds judgment about the veridicality of our actual cognitions. Thus, by positing a unique idea of God in 2p3 and 2p4, Spinoza does nothing more (but also nothing less) than to translate the implicit ontological and normative preconditions underlying our epistemological expectations into his ontological language. In other words, Spinoza does not say that our ideas correspond to reality; his point is merely that, when seeking to understand something, we are—and have to be—epistemological realists, at least when it comes to the object at hand.

24. See Chapter 5, § b, of this part, as well as Part IV, Chapter 12, §§ b and c. In those sections, we will see how Spinoza provides support for the assumption that our factually given ideas have a minimal reality content. He does so not by referring to the idea of God but with the aid of 1ax4.

Body and Mind

WHAT SPINOZA'S THEORY OF IDENTITY SEEKS TO ACHIEVE

IF SPINOZA'S VIEWS on the mind play any role at all in contemporary philosophy of mind, it is mostly because of a single thesis:

a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways.¹

In subsequent passages, this thesis is explicitly rephrased as a statement about the identity of body and mind.² Thus, contemporary research is not entirely wrong when it refers to this thesis as Spinoza's identity theory of mind and body.³ However, in contrast to the classic identity theories of the twentieth century, Spinoza mainly focuses on the relationship between ideas and things, not between body and mind.⁴ Thus, Spinoza's claim that mind and body are identical represents only one aspect—albeit, quite an intriguing one—of what his ontology of the mental has to say about the relationship between thought, knowledge, and being. And, as we have seen in the previous chapters, the main focus of this ontology is to support the realist–rationalist claim that being is comprehensively

1. See 2p7s (C I, 451; G II, 90).

2. See, e.g., 2p21s and 3p2s: “These things are more clearly understood from what is said in 2p7s, namely, that the mind and the body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension” (C I, 494; G II, 141).

3. For this label, also see Pauen 2004 and 2011.

4. Bennett, in particular, points out that 2p7 deals with the relationship not between idea and body but between idea and thing. According to him, Spinoza advocates, “not a thought–extension parallelism” but “a thought–everything parallelism” (Bennett 1984, 153).

and completely intelligible, while also giving us an idea of how this claim might help us to explain mental content.

In the following, I investigate the link between Spinoza's realist rationalism and his approach to the mind-body problem. Two differentiations will have to be made. First, we must avoid the misunderstanding that Spinoza envisions a quasi-mechanistic model, which would provide us with a "map" depicting, as it were, the relationship between body and mind. That he posits the identity of modes in the attribute of thought and in the attribute of extension results from his discussion of the ontological assumptions which we must embrace to avoid lapsing into a skepticism about the mental. Unlike Descartes' account of the pineal gland therefore, which tried to "fix" the link between the mental and the physical, Spinoza's approach remains fully abstract. I believe this is a conscious decision, given that Spinoza avoids the question of *how* body and mind interact from the very outset.⁵

At the same time, it is just as important to note that Spinoza distances himself from any kind of reductionism. Not only does he reject anything amounting to an ontological reduction of the mental to the physical; he also denies that physics has any explanatory advantages. Physical explanations, for him, are not any better or more valid than explanations that seek to elucidate mental phenomena by explicating the ideas that are involved. In that, he differs from identity theorists of the twentieth century. Thus, Spinoza's approach to the mind-body problem has him working on two fronts: while his identity thesis is directed against any kind of agnosticism or skepticism regarding the mental, it also denies the validity of reductive explanations.

But let us consider the details of Spinoza's approach. It revolves around a construction that might seem a little odd, given that it combines two assumptions whose compatibility may strike us as questionable. On the one hand, Spinoza holds that God's attributes represent various independent, irreducible, and self-contained causal contexts, which precludes any causal interaction between the modes of different attributes. Thus, ideas cannot be construed as being caused by physical events and vice versa. On the other hand, Spinoza maintains that the different attributes are ascribed to one and the same object, *res*, and thus ultimately refer to one and the same thing.

This alone should be enough to disqualify the long-held view that Spinoza envisions a psychophysical parallelism, in which two different chains of events

5. See especially Spinoza's remarks, in the preface to Part Five, about the way Descartes explains the union of mind and body (C I, 595, G II, 279). Spinoza criticizes Descartes for operating with concepts that are far from clear and distinct.

quasi-mechanistically run side by side.⁶ Spinoza merely shows here which ontological relationships can be derived from his metaphysics—or from the twofold claim that there can only be one substance and that this substance must have infinitely many attributes.⁷ Independently of the issue of psychophysical phenomena, this raises the following problem: how can the *identity* of the *res*, which is expressed by two modes of different attributes, be reconciled with the notion of an *irreducible difference* between those two attributes? Does this not lead to unresolvable contradictions?

In the literature, misgivings such as these have often been countered by saying that the two attributes correspond to referentially opaque causal contexts.⁸ In logics, opaque contexts are those in which the substitution of extensionally equivalent terms does not preserve the truth value of the statement. Opaque contexts can be created through verbs expressing propositional attitudes but also through tense, modal adverbs, or citations. Consider the following sentences:

1. John believes that Venus is the morning star.
2. The morning star is the evening star.
3. John believes that Venus is the evening star.

Proposition 3 does not follow from propositions 1 and 2 because 1 is referentially opaque. This also means, in turn, that 3 is an informative statement, for it can very well be the case that 1 and 2 are true, whereas 3 is not.

How can this be applied to Spinoza's theory of attributes? Let us consider the following argument:

6. As Macherey (1997a, 71) shows, this follows also from 2p7. The proposition does not maintain the equivalence of two orders—it maintains that the orders of ideas and things are identical. Otherwise, the Latin would have the plural of *idem*, not the singular. Macherey also shows, again through philology, that when Spinoza identifies the two orders, he does not mean to say that order A is identical with order B—he thinks that the orders A and B are identical with order C. This is particularly important for subsequent considerations about the referential opacity of the attributes.

7. For the argument behind Spinoza's theory of identity, see Bennett 1984, 127–35, as well as Della Rocca 1996b, 129–40. They reach different conclusions about the consistency of Spinoza's argument. Whereas Bennett thinks it is not satisfying, Della Rocca emphasizes its consistency, on the assumption that Spinoza maintains the identity of indiscernibles, or a variant of that principle. I think both authors overburden the question of consistency here, all the more so as it cannot be decided based on the textual evidence. It is more promising, I think, to discuss the rationalist agenda behind Spinoza's theory of identity, which is why I have decided to place that discussion at the center of my reconstruction.

8. See Jarrett 1991; Gillot 2001; and especially Della Rocca 1996b, 118–40.

4. Mode a in the attribute of thought causes mode b in the attribute of thought.
5. Mode b in the attribute of thought = mode β in the attribute of extension.⁹

Thus,

6. Mode a in the attribute of thought causes mode β in the attribute of extension.

This conclusion is problematic. Proposition 6 is false; it contradicts 2p5 and 2p6, but Spinoza seems to think that both 4 and 5 are true. How is this possible? The solutions suggested by Spinoza scholars go in two directions. For Bennett and Delahunty, proposition 5 is false in the above formulation; despite the thesis from 2p7s quoted earlier, they do not see Spinoza as claiming that modes in the attribute of thought and modes in the attribute of extension are numerically identical.¹⁰ Jarrett and Della Rocca, on the other hand, note that Spinoza can very well assert that 5 is true if he assumes that statements about the causation of modes within an attribute create referentially opaque contexts. Yet, this would render conclusion 6 invalid, no matter if 5 is true or not.¹¹ Della Rocca even goes one step further, locating a similar mechanism even in statements assigning attributes to particular things. According to him, saying that something is extended or composed of modes in the attribute of thought creates referentially opaque contexts. This is why Della Rocca assumes that Spinoza generally thinks of attributes as intensional properties.¹²

These notes about referentially opaque contexts in Spinoza's theory of mind are very helpful. Most of all, they explain how the *Ethics* can maintain that modes in different attributes are identical, whereas the attributes themselves are irreducibly different. Spinoza apparently assumes that his substance monism allows for various types of ontological descriptions and explanations—and he can make that assumption because the assignation of phenomena to certain attributes

9. I am using Latin letters for modes of thought and Greek for modes of extension.

10. Bennett 1984, 140 ff.; Delahunty 1985, 197. Actually, 2p7s only states that “a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing [*res*]” and not that they are one and the same mode. See also Macherey 1997a, 72–3.

11. Jarrett 1991, 471–2; Della Rocca 1996b, 121 and 127.

12. Della Rocca 1996b, 127. I agree with Della Rocca up to this point. More problematic, I think, is his subsequent claim that Spinoza maintains a strict numerical identity between corporeal and mental modes (and not just a co-referentiality). First of all, this is not what Spinoza explicitly says (see footnote 10). And second, Della Rocca does not employ the principle of sufficient reason in the same way as Spinoza himself does.

creates referentially opaque contexts.¹³ And if what we said above is true, namely that the attributes are not just subjective perspectives but real properties of things, we must even go one step further and assume that the *Ethics* more or less requires such a plurality of explanations. If being has various real properties, and if assigning one of these properties to something creates referentially opaque contexts, and if, finally, all being must be fully intelligible, then there must be at least as many types of explanation as there are properties. Thus, we could say that Spinoza's position combines an ontological substance monism with an ontological property pluralism, with the latter also necessitating a semantic or explanatory pluralism.¹⁴

This does away with the suspicion that Spinoza's approach might be inherently inconsistent. But what do these remarks contribute to the solution of the mind-body problem? At first glance, the theoretical merit seems to be minimal. Spinoza's claim is complex: a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing; this thing is expressed in two different ways; therefore, different explanations are necessary. This claim has no advantages over Cartesian anthropology when it comes to explaining how mental and physical moments collaborate in our actions. Likewise, the benefit of Spinoza's theory of identity seems to pale against that of the sciences; consider, for instance, just the neurophysiological findings in cognitive fields such as cognitive psychology or the psychology of emotions.

Thus, the advantage of this approach must lie on a different level. At this point, it is important to take note of the historical fact that Spinoza was familiar not only with Descartes' own anthropology but also with various appropriations and elaborations of it by others.¹⁵ Spinoza's intention, we can assume, was not so

13. Della Rocca 1996b, 129–40, goes beyond assuming a mere compatibility. Proceeding from the idea mentioned above—that ascriptions of attributes produce referentially opaque contexts—he claims that Spinoza maintains a strict numerical identity of body and mind. In this view, modes of different attributes not only refer to one and the same thing but are numerically identical *as modes*. As for interpreting Spinoza, I find this problematic. As Macherey 1997a, 71, has shown, Spinoza in 2p7 maintains the identity of both attributes with a third *res*. See also footnote 6 of this part.

14. See also Della Rocca 1996b, 19–20. Indeed, if attributes are real properties of things and not just the various subjective points of view we can adopt toward them and if we further assume that predicating these properties produces referentially opaque contexts, then we have to conclude that Spinoza indirectly demands a plurality of explanation types.

15. Two developments come to mind here: first, the occasionalist advancements of Cartesianism by authors such as Clauberg and Guelincx; and then also the debate between Descartes and Regius about the possibility of purely physiological reconstruction of Descartes' approach. Even if it is uncertain whether Spinoza was familiar with Guelincx's writings, we must assume that he had some general knowledge of both tendencies. For his reception of the *Objections* to Descartes' *Meditations*, see also Part II, chapter 5, of this part.

much to propose a further solution to the mind–body problem; he was more interested in *posing the problem* in such a way that certain notorious difficulties do not arise. In this sense, the main goal of Spinoza's theory of identity seems to be to delegitimize certain speculations.

Spinoza likely thought of two possible errors. On the one hand, his rigorous monism questions the ontological legitimacy of the notion of a transcendent, separable mental entity constituting the human mind—even in the sublimated form envisioned by Descartes. Whatever there is belongs to one and the same immanent reality. To posit a separable mind, in contrast, means to abandon the idea of a unified concept of reality—as well as the notion that being is fully explainable.¹⁶ On the other hand, Spinoza buries the hope that the connections between mental and physical states—connections we believe in on the basis of phenomenal facts or historical experiences—constitute direct causal relations, which would allow them to be broken down in quasi-mechanistic fashion. If this were truly the case, there would have to be an interaction between two completely different things, which is precisely what Spinoza's theory of identity rules out.

To avoid these errors, Spinoza's theory of identity tells us how to think about the mind and the body—or, rather, how not to think about them. Even though their exact interplay is left undefined, at least up to proposition 2p7,¹⁷ that does not prevent us from applying this approach to everyday cases. Let us imagine someone who just won the lottery and rushes to tell his friends. In a situation like this, if forced to choose between the one and the other, it would be hard to determine whether his running causes his elation or whether his elation causes his pace. Yet, it makes perfect sense to say that both pace and elation are expressions of his winning the lottery. In his theory of identity, Spinoza endorses this view on a fundamental level. We have a right to assume that mental phenomena such as an instance of joy and physical events such as a series of quick steps belong to one and the same reality, both being an expression of the same order of things. Thus, it is not a false conclusion to relate the lottery winner's joy and running to the same decisive event. But if we start asking questions about which causes which—does

16. See also Part I, Chapter 2, § b.

17. A more concrete picture—or an outline thereof—emerges from the propositions following the physical digression, which, in a nutshell, contain a sort of cognitive psychology. Further below, I will also refer to this passage as Spinoza's theory of the imagination. Note, however, that this too operates within the confines of the rationalistically inspired theory of identity. In particular, Spinoza keeps insisting on the autonomy of mental causation—and, thus, on an explanatory pluralism. I will demonstrate this in Part IV, Chapter 12, § b.

the elation cause the pace or the other way around?—then we lose ourselves in absurd speculations.

We can therefore conclude that propositions 2p5 to 2p7 leave it open how exactly particular mental and physical events interact; all they do is establish the general ontological framework for possible explanations of mental states. Spinoza's theory of identity outlines the ontological relations that are necessary in order to assign mental phenomena a place in the natural order of being—even if those may seem difficult to grasp at first. Thus, Spinoza advocates a decidedly naturalist approach, albeit one that is based on metaphysical premises, which do not imply the methodological priority of physical explanations. We could also say that Spinoza establishes the general conditions for explaining mental states, without formulating specific expectations of how an explanation has to look in individual cases. Yet, once it is clear that mental phenomena are natural events, then any approach that respects the specific character of the mental can be used to explain them.

To see the significance of this move, let us consider the identity theories of the twentieth century to which Spinoza's philosophy is occasionally compared.¹⁸ These, too, fail to make sense if we simply read them as inquiring into the ontological status of mental phenomena. Just like Spinoza's, their approach can be deciphered only if we focus on the question of explanatory access. In his explanation of consciousness, for instance, Michael Pauen has reinterpreted the classical identity theories of Herbert Feigl, Jack J. Smart, and Ullin T. Place along these lines.¹⁹ According to Pauen, the classical identity theories refrain from reducing mental states to corresponding physiological events, which is why the phenomenal appearance of mental states is actually preserved. These theories merely suggest that neurological explanations of neuronal states of affairs should also hold for the explanation of the corresponding mental states.²⁰ In other words, they seek a reductive explanation of mental states, but they do not promote a reductionist view when it comes to the reality of subjective experiences.²¹

Now, these approaches promote a rather specific view of what explanations of mental states should look like. One crucial idea is that mental phenomena are

18. See especially Gillot 2001 and Pauen 2004.

19. See especially Pauen 1999, 79–80. On various occasions, Pauen mentions Spinoza's historical influence on Herbert Feigl, an influence mediated by Schelling and Theodor Fechner (see Pauen 1999, 73, and, more elaborately, Pauen 2004, 51–2). Heidelberger (1993, 78) had already drawn attention to this influence.

20. Pauen 1999, 80, and 2004, 38–9. See also Smart 2004 (1958), 119–20.

21. In this context, also consider how Place 1956, 44, distances himself from behaviorism, as well as Feigl 1958, 61–2.

higher-level properties, which can be explained through more fundamental—physical or neurological—properties. In Spinoza, we do not encounter this kind of implicit architectural layering of levels of reality. His metaphysics contains no clue that certain attributes or manifestations of reality would be more fundamental than others. On the contrary, it is a crucial insight of his concept of attributes that there can be no foundational relationships between various forms of reality. And that is why both physicalist and idealist reconstructions of Spinoza's metaphysics are mistaken.

For Spinoza, there are no ontological reasons to assume that certain types of explanation have any principal advantage over other types; in that respect, he differs from the classical identity theories. There might be practical reasons, however, to believe that it is easier to reach adequate ideas about bodies than about thoughts and emotions. In that sense, the physicists of the seventeenth century may have had a certain strategic advantage over the advocates of other disciplines. But that is not to say that the objects of their knowledge are more fundamental—let alone more real—than those discussed by linguists, psychologists, or psychoanalysts.²² On the other hand, we may have good reasons to posit that the self-preservation of reason—and, for Spinoza, that means the mind insofar it has rational knowledge—takes precedence over the self-preservation of the body. But that, too, does not entail any ontological primacy of the mental over the physical.

Thus, when it comes to the question of explanatory access to the mental, Spinoza's approach is much more liberal than the classical identity theories. This is mostly because he combines an ontological substance monism with an ontological property pluralism, which—on the basis of Spinoza's rationalism—necessitates a semantic and explanatory pluralism. But how, we may ask, does this approach compare to those contemporary theories which, while also denying the possibility of reductive explanation, nonetheless maintain that the mental is ultimately identical with the physical? Do these theories represent a form of modern Spinozism?

In Spinoza scholarship, we sometimes read about parallels between Spinoza's approach and certain positions held in the contemporary philosophy of mind. With regard to the mind–body problem, two names are frequently mentioned: Donald Davidson and Thomas Nagel.²³ And indeed, these two

22. This also does not rule out the possibility that physical or physiological considerations can play a role in psychology or epistemology. See the Interlude follow Part III of the present book.

23. For Davidson, see Jarrett 1991 and Della Rocca 1996b; for Nagel, see Amann 2000 and especially Gillot 2001. The extent of Spinoza's influence on Davidson and Nagel requires distinction. Davidson rejects such an influence (see Glüer 1993, 162) but did read Spinoza later in his life (see Davidson 1980, 212, and 1999). As for Nagel, I think the inspirations he received from Spinoza are obvious, even though they seem to remain undocumented. There are a few

philosophers hold that the mental and the physical are ontologically identical,²⁴ while denying the possibility of physical explanations for mental phenomena.²⁵ This combination of claims seems to put them in the neighborhood of Spinoza's decidedly nonreductionist, nonphysicalist naturalism. What we do not find in them, however, is any equivalent to Spinoza's conviction that mental phenomena are fully intelligible. On the contrary, although neither Davidson nor Nagel promotes skepticism in his epistemological views, they both reach positions in their philosophy of mind that fundamentally limit our knowledge of the mental. Let us therefore conclude by taking a look at these positions, to find out what kinds of limits these are.

As far as Nagel's approach is concerned, the issue is quite clear. Few other philosophers have so effectively criticized the position that consciousness can be reduced to physical facts than Nagel in his classic essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"²⁶ The subjective character of our experience, the essay argues, simply cannot be grasped by the methods of natural science, which is why any reductive analysis of the mental must necessarily remain incomplete.²⁷ Nonetheless, Nagel thinks that the demand for objectivity should be maintained, even with regard to the ontological status of the mental—and, what is more, "in accordance with the physical conception of objectivity."²⁸

This combination may seem rather surprising: how can descriptions of the mental be irreducibly subjective if Nagel also commits to a notion of objectivity borrowed from physics? But considered in and by itself, Nagel's position is perfectly consistent. If what qualifies as mental is largely determined by the "*how* it is to experience *x*," then the possibility of objectively describing mental phenomena by an analysis of their content is automatically limited. Consequently, a notion of objectivity based on external factors becomes more trustworthy than a notion based on mental content. Thus, Nagel's insistence on congruence with the physical notion of objectivity merely complements his overall concept of mind, which centers around the irreducibility of subjective experience. Yet, the question

remarks about Spinoza in Nagel 1986, but they appear to deny any influence. For the reception of Spinoza in analytic philosophy, see Hampe, Renz, and Schnepf 2011b. A history of Spinoza's influence on analytic philosophy remains to be written.

24. Nagel 1986, 40; Davidson 1980, 224.

25. Nagel 1965, 353–4; 1974, 435–6; Davidson 1980, 207.

26. See Nagel 1965, 353–4; 1974, 435–6.

27. Nagel 1974, 436–7.

28. Nagel 1986, 28–9. For the problems surrounding a mentalist conception of objectivity, see Nagel 1986, 17 ff.

remains: does it actually make sense to place the *how* of subjective experience at the center of the mental?

Spinoza would probably answer in the negative. For him, the crucial element of the mental is not the subjective or qualitative character of experience but its intentionality, that is, that we have ideas *about* certain objects. To be an intelligent being requires that we have intentional states.²⁹ This is not to say that, for Spinoza, it makes no sense at all to raise the question of *how* it feels to have a certain intentional state.³⁰ On the contrary, he thinks that our having an idea frequently goes along with our experiencing some sort of feeling. But, for him, the defining characteristic of the mental is something different, namely the intentional relation to things involved in our having ideas. This entails that mental states can be explained by analyzing the ideas involved in them, and this in turns explains why the possibility of a physical explanation is not the only way to support the claim that the mental is fully intelligible.

We can conclude that the restrictions which Nagel puts on our knowledge of the mental are not as binding for Spinoza as they are for Nagel's own concept of mind, which is centered around the nature of consciousness. But what about Davidson? Does he have objections that pose a serious challenge to Spinoza's rationalism?

To answer this, we must reach a little further. First of all, it is not at all clear how Davidson's approach is different from Spinoza's. When it comes to philosophical approaches to the mental, Davidson seems to have ambitions easily identifiable as "rationalist" (but not, as we will see, in the sense envisioned by Spinoza). Both Davidson's theory of action and his philosophy of language are intent on showing that human action and language are subject to rational reconstruction.³¹ In addition, Davidson's take on the relationship between body and mind is remarkably similar to Spinoza's, at least at first glance. Just like Spinoza's identity theory, Davidson's anomalous monism features an unlikely combination: mental and physical events are ultimately identical, whereas reductive explanations are categorically precluded. Finally, Davidson justifies this position by making a

29. In Part III, Chapter 10, §§ a and d, I show that, in the definitions of the mind in 2p11 and 2p13, Spinoza also determines the specific object of the mind. But this is because the definition does not merely elucidate the concept of the mental but responds to the question of the numerical difference between individual minds. For the concept of the mental itself, see also Chapter 5 of this book.

30. See also my discussion of Spinoza's theory of affects in Part IV, Chapter 13.

31. It is essential for his action theory that Davidson considers the reasons given by speakers to explain their own actions to be causes for actions; see Davidson 1980, 3–19. For his philosophy of language, see especially his remarks about truth-conditional semantics in Davidson 1984, 17–36.

claim reminiscent of Spinoza's pluralism of attributes. Reductive explanations are bound to fail because there are no strict psychophysical laws—which in turn is due to the disparate demands made by mental and physical schemas.³² Thus, Davidson claims, like Spinoza, that the mental and the physical require different theoretical approaches.

But when Davidson distinguishes between the theoretical discussion of physical and mental phenomena, he is not merely concerned with vocabulary. He is also concerned with what kinds of explanations we can reasonably expect when it comes to both types of object. While physical events can, at least in principle, be individuated and described in terms of the stipulation of specific laws, this is impossible in the case of mental events. Mental states cannot even be ascribed to a subject, unless we attribute to the subject an entire network of convictions and other propositional attitudes.³³ Thus, the description of mental events is much more precarious than that of physical events, which is why Davidson insists that any theory of the human mind has to proceed from the ascription of mental states.³⁴ This also sheds light on the notion that human speech and action are rationally comprehensible. This is an assumption we must make if we want to reflect on mental phenomena in a methodologically informed way.

By this point, it should be clear that the differences between Davidson and Spinoza are bigger than might have been expected. By focusing on the conditions for ascribing mental states, Davidson poses a problem that simply does not exist for Spinoza, at least not in this form. Spinoza's question is not how we can identify concrete mental states as clearly as possible and ascribe them to ourselves or to others. He simply assumes that we know what we are talking about when we analyze a certain idea that we have, asking ourselves why it is that we have this and not any other idea. Moreover, he can always invoke the notion that the ascription of mental states poses no difficulties from the perspective of an infinite intellect. Thus, Spinoza simply has no reason to ponder the ascription of mental states at a fundamental level.

We can thus conclude that Spinoza's claim of complete intelligibility of the mental aims at something different from Davidson's rational comprehensibility of the mental. While Spinoza thinks that the mental must be fully knowable *from the viewpoint of an infinite intellect*, Davidson considers rational comprehensibility a necessary condition for tackling mental phenomena *intersubjectively*.

32. Davidson 1980, 222.

33. Davidson 1980, 217.

34. See also Davidson 2004, 257–8.

And this insight can be used to develop a methodical procedure for interpreting mental phenomena.

This goes hand in hand with another difference. Davidson's focus on the ascription of mental states operates with a concept of mind that is just as alien to Spinoza's as Nagel's definition of the mental, which centered around the concept of consciousness. For Davidson, being in a mental state typically means having a propositional attitude, which in turn requires the subject to subscribe to an entire network of beliefs that are more or less consistent.³⁵ This is why, for Davidson, the realm of the mental ultimately coincides with reason.³⁶ This is not at all the case for Spinoza. While Spinoza also assumes that ideas are organized holistically, he rejects the claim that every being that has ideas and a mind therefore also has the ability to form *notiones communes*. On the contrary, this ability requires a relatively complex mind, and not every being with a mind is also rational.

We can conclude that, despite apparent similarities, Davidson's and Spinoza's approaches are markedly different, and not only when it comes to marginal issues.³⁷ In fact, they differ on crucial points, such as the concept of mind and the goals of their respective concepts of the human mind. While Davidson aims to lend a rational and objective basis to our practice of belief ascription, Spinoza's approach is to prove that the mental is explainable—including those phenomena that have little to do with the faculty of rational knowledge.

It is this very same goal of securing the explainability of the mental that is also at the bottom of Spinoza's identity theory. As we saw above, this theory is meant not to track the exact interplay between mental and physical events but merely to establish an ontological framework on the basis of which future theories of both physical and mental phenomena may be developed. In other words, the identity theory is an expression of Spinoza's rationalist hopes, yet it does not commit him to any sort of physicalist reductionism. On the contrary: with his identity theory, Spinoza rejects both physicalism and the possibility of reductive explanation. Likewise, his naturalism is ultimately informed by his rationalism and not by any sort of physicalism. When Spinoza addresses certain things as "natural"—for instance, the affects—he posits them to be explainable. Natural entities have knowable causes—either in themselves or in something else. In 2p7, Spinoza maintains that ideas of things—or the mental states to which these ideas correspond—are also part of the realm of nature.

35. Davidson 1984, 155–70.

36. This is why Davidson considers it problematic for a bat to have a mind. While it knows what it is like to be a bat, it cannot tell us or reason about it. See also Perler and Wild 2006, 27.

37. Perler 2007, 20, reaches a similar conclusion.

PART III

Theory of the Subject

The Concept of the Human

Mind and Its Premises

OUP-USA

The Problem of the Numerical Difference between Subjects

WHEN WE USE Spinoza's *Ethics* to think about our own experiences, we soon come across a fundamental problem: how is it even possible for me to ascribe certain thoughts, emotions, or experiences to myself, while denying them of others? This is not merely a theoretical issue; it has practical relevance in everyday life. Imagine someone at work telling me enthusiastically about a hiking tour he took during the weekend. I am very familiar with that route, having walked it myself a few years earlier—but it struck me as far less spectacular than he makes it out to be; I actually found it rather arduous and boring. Yet, I don't want to disillusion him, so I say nothing and keep my thoughts to myself.

That such behavior is possible at all presupposes—besides other conditions to be discussed later—that my working colleague and I are two numerically different subjects. His account of the hiking tour does not simply become my own experience. On the contrary, his report evokes entirely different associations, which have their origin in my own biography. If his description of the route triggers subjective emotions of a different quality in me—different from what his story seems intent on provoking—it is because there is a numerical difference between us as subjects.

This may seem trivial. But, in fact, it is not at all clear how such a numerical difference between subjects can be conceived in the context of the *Ethics*. It matters less that Spinoza is not in possession of the modern concept of subject, in the sense of a being endowed with self-awareness. It is true that the term *subiectum*, as used in the *Ethics*, does not have the meaning it does today, which is informed by recent theory of consciousness. It is used in the traditional, logical-ontological sense, to refer to any *res singularis* that serves as a grammatical subject

of predication.¹ The issue of the numerical difference between subjects, however, cannot be historicized as conveniently as the terminology. Even before the invention of modern nomenclature, philosophers had to be able to tell what we presuppose in ascribing different thoughts to ourselves from those we ascribe to our neighbor. And, as we can see from the medieval treatment of Averroism, this has been a hotly debated issue.

But as for the difficulties we encounter when we want the *Ethics* to account for the numerical difference between subjects, another factor is more decisive: when Spinoza first discusses the reality of thought, he does so without explaining how thought is ascribed to a subject.² In this, his approach is markedly different from Descartes', which guarantees only the reality of one's own *res cogitans*, precisely by evoking the indubitability of the *cogito*. It is not just that Spinoza is clearer than Descartes in distinguishing between two issues—indeed, it is one thing to show what constitutes the reality of thought but another entirely to determine who or what is thinking. On top of that, Spinoza also reverses the order in which Descartes had discussed these issues. For Spinoza, the ontology of the mental comes first, and only then does he introduce his concept of the finite mind. This allows him to, among other things, keep the problem of solipsism at arm's length. For if thought and extension are real properties of being³—regardless of the fact that I myself think or that I feel my body—then the only thing that can happen is that I err in relating the content of my thoughts to particular extramental objects. But it is no longer conceivable that all thought relates to nothing and that there is nothing at all beyond thought. This skeptical scenario is ruled out from the outset by the structure of Spinoza's exposition.

Now, instead of the problem of solipsism, Spinoza has to deal with another, diametrically opposed, difficulty: how can we explicate the exclusive relation that exists between a specific thought and a single epistemic subject that has this thought? How is it possible that I, when I think about the aforementioned hiking tour, remember nothing but a barren landscape, whereas my colleague reacts to the same thought by remembering a spectacular vista? One thing is clear: whether this kind of exclusive relation can be conceived within the confines of Spinoza's

1. Consider, for instance, 3p5, which rules out that two things of a contrary nature can be in the same subject without the one destroying the other. It is important to note, however, that, even in late scholasticism, the traditional notion of the logical–ontological subject was also used when mental predicates were ascribed to epistemic subjects. See Courtine 1990, 11.

2. See also the Introduction of this book, as well as Part II, Chapter 6, § b.

3. In contrast to Bartuschat (1992a, 72–3), who thinks that 2p1 and 2p2 are based on 2ax2 and 2ax4, I'd like to stress that there's no reference to these axioms in the proofs of these propositions.

approach depends on whether or not he can give an intelligible and plausible answer to the question of how subjects are distinguished from each other. This touches upon the very heart of the ambition we ascribed to the *Ethics*: that subjective experience is explainable can only be maintained if Spinoza's approach can solve the problem of the numerical difference between subjects.

It is—and this is a major tenet of my reconstruction—this concern with the individuation of finite subjects that Spinoza addresses in the passages between 2p8 and 2p13, which culminate in the often-cited thesis that the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body.⁴ I will show in detail that this passage does not result, as is often assumed, in a solution to the mind–body problem; in 2p13, Spinoza answers a much more specific question: how do I differentiate myself, if conceived as a mind, from other minds? Yet, 2p13 only marks the end of a discussion that starts with 2p11, if not earlier. And, as Spinoza makes clear in 2p10 and 2p10c, the solution to the problem of numerical difference between subjects presupposes important considerations about the mind's being a mode.

Thus, in deriving his definition of the human mind, Spinoza develops a notion of the subject whose central concern is to determine what it is that separates different subjects. Apparently, this question cannot be solved by means of the resources afforded to Spinoza by physics and metaphysics. But why is that? Note that, traditionally, it was the metaphysical concept of mode that was used to establish differences between beings, even in cases that do not involve two different substances. Moreover, Spinoza's physical conception of the individual also seems to provide him with a model for the individuation of things. This model shows in detail how two things that his metaphysics characterizes as two different *res particulares*, or modes of God's attributes, can indeed be conceived as numerically different. Why is it not sufficient, then, to account for the numerical difference between subjects by simply referring to different subjects as separate modes or as different *individua* in the physical sense of the word discussed above?⁵ Why does Spinoza's theory of the human mind need an additional piece, located between the physics and the metaphysics, which tells us how the *numerical difference between subjects*—or, in Spinoza's terminology, *mentes humanae*—can be explained?

4. If we were to interpret this proposition as saying that the human mind is the idea of the body, we would get its focus wrong. The proposition does say this, indirectly, and Spinoza himself sometimes uses it in this very sense (for instance, in 2p19d). But the actual wording is different: "The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body" ("Objectum ideae humanum mentem constituentis est corpus") (C I, 457; G II, 96). It is therefore not wrong to say that Spinoza considers the human mind to be the idea of the body—but it is misleading, for it suggests a purpose alien to what Spinoza seems to have had in mind while writing this proposition.

5. See Part I, Chapter 3.

The answer is clear: both the concept of mode and the concept of individual can be applied to too many things, including those that remain unaffected by the problems posed by the numerical difference between subjects. Even two raindrops are two different modes in Spinoza's terminology, and yet they become one as soon as they come into contact with each other. Both their initial difference and their becoming one can be illuminated very nicely with the concepts of mode and individual. But human beings are different: humans, too, are modes for Spinoza, it is true; and they are capable of joining together in social groups, thereby forming larger social individuals.⁶ That makes them an object of physics and metaphysics, just like two merging raindrops. But there is a very important additional aspect: according to Spinoza's political philosophy, humans can and must continue to think of themselves as different subjects even if they are part of a larger social body and perceive themselves as such.

In this respect, Spinoza's approach is diametrically opposed to Hobbes': Spinoza thinks that the absolutist model of the state, recommended by Hobbes as a suitable means against the war of all against all, is not only undesirable but also infeasible. As the last chapter of the TTP makes clear, all we can do in the face of (expected) dissent is bring people to pretend to believe things they cannot truly embrace—or else to keep silent; in the best of cases, we may force them to adopt an opinion that is not truly their own. But we cannot compel them to surrender their judgment and their individuality as subjects to the sovereign.⁷ This remains true despite Spinoza's various articulations of the idea that human thought can largely be manipulated. On the contrary, to manipulate someone's thought means to impose a certain view on that person, a view that he would otherwise reject but which he now feels compelled to consider *his own*. Thus, to think of humans as manipulable beings actually entails—rather than precludes—the notion of numerically different subjects.⁸

It seems, then, that Spinoza rules out the possibility that we can delegate our being a subject—our subjectivity, so to speak—to other individuals, including the social bodies in which we are participate. We could even say that the deeply humane outlook of Spinoza's thought, as well as the subtle satirical bite of some of his writings, both derive from this impossibility of delegating our nature as a subject: it will always be the individual human being who suffers or holds absurd

6. See Part I, Chapter 3, § c.

7. On the significance of this point, see also Walther 2011, 224.

8. I share Althusser's sentiment that the *Ethics* contains a sort of theory of ideology. But I do not think that it centers around "the illusion of the subject" (Althusser 1998, 184). In my view, the pivotal point of Spinoza's critique of ideology is his claim that subjects have free rein over their thoughts.

views, even if he or she suffers with others or because of them; and this is something from which none of us can escape, even if we decide against our better judgment to adopt the views of others. Inquiring into the numerical difference between subjects, then, is absolutely crucial for the theoretical foundation of Spinoza's practical philosophy. There is a lot at stake in the claim that humans are numerically different from each other—and this not just in the sense in which raindrops or stones are numerically different from each other. Proving this claim depends on whether Spinoza's theory of virtue is more than just a higher form of moral edification and whether his theory of the state is more than just a philosophical attempt to intervene in contemporary political discussions about the nature of the state.

In other words, it is crucial for Spinoza's political philosophy to explain the numerical difference between subjects. This also sheds some light on another important point: Spinoza seems to think that, even though our own being a subject cannot be delegated, our feeling and thinking—and, thus, the relation we entertain to ourselves—can still be largely determined by others. This last point more or less follows from the general ontology of Part One of the *Ethics*, which comes down to the claim that humans cannot be substances but must be understood as modes.⁹ In 2p10 and 2p10c, Spinoza stresses this point once again. Now, according to Spinoza's theory of causality, modes are always dependent on something else—and not just in their being and their existence but also in their actions. Thus, when Spinoza insists, in his account of the human mind, that our subjectivity cannot be delegated to others, he does not mean to say that humans are self-determined. According to Spinoza, a subject can neither freely determine its actions nor spontaneously determine its thought. For *what* somebody thinks—and, thus, in what terms she thinks of her own existence—often depends on those biological, emotional, historical, scientific, or linguistic factors that determine her existence and understanding of things. But the fact *that* someone thinks falls within the domain of individual subjects, for it is they who perform the activity of thought. In this sense, it is perfectly possible to hold that human action and thought are heteronomous while also conceiving of being-a-subject as something that cannot be delegated.

Thus, Spinoza not only subordinates his conception of the human subject to the ontology of the mental; he also separates it from that part of his theory of the human subject that deals with the *determination of mental content*. This distinction is important because it allows Spinoza to coherently maintain these two points—that being a subject is genuinely undelegatable, while it is nonetheless

9. See Part I, Chapter 2, §§ c and e.

the case that numerous external influences have a formative effect on human thought. Seen in this light, the implicit layout of the parts of Spinoza's system mentioned during the introduction is enormously important, for it makes it possible for us to reconstruct Spinoza's theory of the human mind in a way that does justice to his political philosophy.

All this also enables us to situate Spinoza's approach quite precisely within philosophical discussion about subjectivity and human self-knowledge. Despite the fact that Spinoza never fully elaborates his views on the human self, it is clear that he ultimately intends to reconcile extreme positions. At least since Hegel, the image of Spinozism as a philosophy without a subject has been prevalent. Yet, his position is much more subtle and complex than that. Granted, the German idealists correctly assessed that Spinoza's substance lacks all subjectivity.¹⁰ But in their own quest for an idealist foundation of philosophical knowledge, they failed to ask whether we might not be better off conceiving of human beings first and foremost as dependent beings—taking humans to be dependent might lead to a better philosophical understanding of what it means to be a subject. Instead, German idealism insisted on conceiving of the subject as positing itself.

A similarly subtle approach is required when it comes to claims that Spinoza is a predecessor to the postmodern critique of the modern concept of subject. Philosophers who hold an idealist concept of subject—as was the case for Althusser and his students—are not entirely wrong when they identify Spinoza as a critic of the notion of subject. Is he not, after all, vehemently opposed to the idea that humans can spontaneously control their thoughts?¹¹ But this does not entail that Spinoza anticipates “the death of the subject” when he denies humans subject status. For what Spinoza himself would call a subject does not perish so easily, even if the being of humans were deprived of spontaneity and freedom of will.

To characterize Spinoza's attitude regarding the notion of subject underlying his conception of the human mind, it is useful to compare his views to positions recently developed in analytic philosophy. In the past few decades, analytic philosophers have striven to conciliate the extremes. Most important in

10. As I have shown in Chapter 1 of Part I, one of the crucial systematic decisions behind the *Ethics* consists in dissociating the concept of “substance” from the notion of “subject.” For the reception of Spinoza's concept of “substance” in the philosophy of German idealism, see Fichte's remarks in his *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (Fichte 1988) and Hegel's in his *Wissenschaft der Logik* (in Hegel 2010). For Schelling, the concept of “substance” is less significant; see, for instance, his *Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus* (1980). That substance lacks subjectivity has already been emphasized by Wolfgang Cramer 1966. For a meta-critique of Cramer, see Bartuschat 1990, 103–4.

11. See Althusser 1998, 184–5, as well as Macherey's 1990 comprehensive discussion, especially 74–5. See also Albiac 1996, 16–7, and footnote 6 of this chapter.

this respect is the debate on whether or not authoritative self-knowledge of, or privileged access to, one's own mental states is compatible with semantic externalism.¹² According to compatibilists such as Donald Davidson and Tyler Burge, the idea of an authoritative self-knowledge can generally be reconciled with a semantic externalism.¹³ Critics of compatibilism, such as Michael McKinsey and Crispin Wright, on the other hand, point out that these approaches fail to capture what we think we are doing when we ascribe mental states to ourselves.¹⁴

Note that the conceptual space in which this debate takes place is relatively narrow: there is no controversy over whether human beings are subjects or not, nor is there any doubt that a certain privilege of the first person with respect to his knowledge of his own mental states is generally compatible with a semantic externalism. The bone of contention is rather how we are to understand this privilege and what kind of epistemological and psychological implications follow from the assumption of such a privilege. Thus, the debate has a similar conceptual scope to Spinoza's implicit distinction between the tenet that one's being a subject is in principle undelegatable and the assumption that the content of our thought is subject to manifold external influences.

But how exactly, one is inclined to ask, does the *Ethics* establish this difference? And where in the *Ethics* does Spinoza discuss the issue that being a subject is undelegatable? So far, I have only argued that both things—the differentiation and the claim that being a subject is undelegatable—are necessary for Spinoza's political philosophy. But if we want to establish these issues as fundamental characteristics of Spinoza's theory of the human mind, we need to locate them within this theory itself. For this purpose, we must once more point to the order of the presentation of themes in the structure of the text. It is notable that the numerical difference between subjects is treated *before* the physical concept of individual is introduced. This implies that the numerical difference between subjects and the individuation of bodies are considered to be separate theoretical problems and that the former can be solved *without relying on physical facts*. Thus, despite the ontological identity of body and mind, Spinoza does not seem to think that the

12. Participants in this discussion do not always distinguish between the notion of privileged access and that of the authority of the first person. One may wonder whether this isn't a problem. In the passage above, however, the question is merely whether the assumption of a basic self-knowledge is compatible with a semantic externalism. In this specific context, the distinction between privileged access and authority is fairly insignificant, which is why I neglect it as well.

13. See especially Davidson 2001, 15–39, and Burge 1988 and 1996.

14. See McKinsey 1998 and Wright 1998, 13–46. It should be noted that Wright and McKinsey, while being united in their critique of compatibilism, draw different consequences from this critique. For the overall debate, see the texts printed in Cassam 1994.

numerical difference between subjects can be proven simply by explaining physical individuality. On the other hand, the laws that determine the content of our ideas are discussed not only *after* but also on the basis of theses developed during the physical digression. Thus, in contrast to sections dedicated to the concept of mind and its derivation, the part of the theory that deals with the determination of content also takes into consideration external knowledge, that is, knowledge that does not arise from introspection. The only exception is the thesis that content is holistically determined—this claim is made before the physical digression as it also has relevance for the theory of the subject.

In this third part of my reconstruction, I will deal only with the implicit argument for the claim that being a subject is undelegatable. The goal is to bring out certain theoretical premises that underlie Spinoza's conception of the human mind. I will show that this conception contains a solution for the problem of the numerical difference between subjects, a solution that highlights the reasons why being a subject is non-transferable. This only becomes clear, however, if we refrain from reading the individual propositions simply as deductive exercises. They should instead be considered answers to questions that Spinoza could have expected his readers to ask. Propositions 2p11 to 2p13 in particular are much more geared toward potential objections and misunderstandings than seems to be the case at first sight. The scholium to 2p11,¹⁵ for instance, brings up the danger of slipping into a kind of Averroism—that is, the danger of abolishing the individuality of subjects. Avoidance of this danger, we must assume, is a driving force behind Spinoza's discussion. We will see that, judging from its arguments, the *Ethics* has no trouble avoiding this peril. Yet many readers, who were either unable or unwilling to acknowledge this, have accused Spinoza of Averroism nonetheless, so that, somewhat paradoxically, "Spinozism" even became the new term for what, in the medieval period, was called "Averroism."

15. "Here, no doubt, my readers will come to a halt, and think of many things which will give them pause. For this reason I ask them to continue on with me slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all" (C I, 456; G II, 95). In the literature on Spinoza, I haven't encountered any significant remarks about this scholium.

Finitude, or the Limited Knowability of Finite Things

WHEN WE SPEAK of experiences in everyday life, we usually refer to events that affect us—or somebody else—in some way. Getting caught in a massive thunderstorm during our last hike certainly qualifies as an experience; rainfall that we barely notice, on the other hand, most likely does not. We apparently have the intuition that experience is something which, by definition, happens to someone and for which the relation to a subject—and, indeed, a concrete, historically situated subject—is somehow constitutive.¹

It should be clear that this intuition poses a challenge to the kind of realist rationalism espoused by Spinoza. In fact, it might even appear to spell doom for his ambition to show that experience is explainable. There are many people, including philosophers, who not only conceive of experience as something that relates to a subject but also tend to conclude that the subject of an experience enjoys privileged epistemic access to that experience. In contemporary philosophy of mind, this view is often supported by saying that we can know only from the first-person perspective *what it is like* to have a certain experience.² This in

1. We could ask whether this also applies to the conception of experience known, in the philosophy of science, as empirical knowledge. In this context, clearly, the relation to a subject is not at the forefront of the discussion. The subject mostly appears as part of an experiment, with its particular characteristics being intentionally left out of consideration. This does not mean, however, that empirical knowledge has no bearing at all on subjects but merely that it is inconsequential for their content. For the history of the concept of experience, see Holzhey 1970 and Kambartel 1972.

2. *Loci classici* for the assumption of qualia are Nagel 1974 and Jackson 2004. The latter is interested solely in an epistemological problem, not in a problem concerning the theory of consciousness. For the critique of qualia from a cognitive perspective, see Dennett 1997; Lewis 1990 argues against the epistemological consequences of Jackson. For a concise summary of the discussion, see Van Gulick 1997, who also takes a position against Jackson.

turn leads to the assumption of some necessary explanatory gap. Since it is only from the first-person perspective that we can tell what it is like to have a certain experience, any explanation of experience given from the third-person perspective is regarded as necessarily incomplete.³

From the standpoint of Spinoza's realist rationalism, this conclusion is problematic. It might well be true that experiential content has certain irreducible phenomenal qualities that are only known through first-hand experience.⁴ But, according to Spinoza, this does not mean that there must be an absolutely unbridgeable explanatory gap. As we have seen, claiming that all being is completely intelligible ultimately amounts to an ontological statement, which has primacy over phenomenological considerations.⁵ There is no reason to think that the task of explaining experience is any different. Pointing out that experience has phenomenological qualities, then, qualities whose knowledge depends on subject-specific conditions, does not invalidate the ontological claim that experience can in principle be explained.

Furthermore, it strikes me as questionable that we have to assume an epistemic privilege just because experience may contain certain irreducible qualities. It may be that certain types of experience can be fully understood only if we have ourselves had an experience of a similar type and identified it as such. But this merely justifies the assumption of a type-specific privilege: someone who has never loved and suffered on account of that love will probably not know what lovesickness is. But this does not mean that there is no explanation at all for the grief caused by the loss of a loved object; at most, it means that the explanation requires its author to be minimally familiar with the phenomenon of love.⁶ The situation is not much different if we assume that *all* experiences have such irreducible qualities. In this case, too, all we can stipulate is the existence of an extended type-specific privilege, in the sense that experience is epistemically accessible only to beings who can experience things themselves.

3. Aside from Nagel 1974, others have also considered this a *necessary gap*, especially Levine 2004 (who refers to an *explanatory gap*) and McGinn 1982 (with his theory of a *subjective view*). Pauen (2003, 199 ff.; 1999, 180) stresses that, even though this explanatory gap does exist, it can be overcome.

4. Spinoza's take on this question cannot be determined unequivocally, all the more so as there is no mention anywhere of secondary qualities, those early modern precursors of qualia. That said, on the question of emotional qualities, see Part IV, Chapter 13.

5. See Part II, Chapter 4.

6. In the *Ethics*, we certainly find a counterpart for this kind of type-specific privilege, namely in the knowledge of evil. Spinoza alleges (e.g., in 4p64c) that a mind with only adequate ideas would be incapable of forming the notion of evil (C I, 583; G II, 259). See also my remarks about Spinoza's concept of conscience, Part IV, Chapter 13, § a.

All this means is that the person issuing the explanation must himself be a subject of experience; it does not mean that he must be the subject of the concrete experience that needs explaining.⁷

We can therefore conclude that the intuitive view of the concept of experience, according to which experience is always linked to a specific subject, does not have to jeopardize the rationalist project of advocating the notion that experience is explainable. Clearly though, when it comes to explaining experiences had by this or that subject, we can expect that additional factors must be taken into account, factors that have not even been mentioned yet. In this context, it is worth taking a closer look at the material from 2p8 to 2p9c. These propositions do not yet deal with the concept of the human mind, but they are also no longer concerned with the fundamental question of *whether* being in general is completely intelligible either. Instead, this material discusses *under which conditions* certain things or certain aspects of being are intelligible. Thus, it largely forms the hinge between the ontology of the mental and that part of Spinoza's theory that, by means of establishing the definition of the mind, examines the notion of human subjectivity.

Concretely, these two propositions and their corollaries are concerned with the question of the intelligibility of the *existence of singular things* (a) and of the *reality of events* (b). As will be seen, knowledge of these two aspects of being depends on requirements that are not fulfilled solely by stipulating an idea of God. On the contrary, as our analysis of 2p9c will show, these aspects of being can be known only by finite subjects. Thus, we could also say that, in these propositions, Spinoza does indeed advocate some sort of epistemic privilege, although not a privilege held by the first person but one tied up with the existence of finite things. Consequently, there is knowledge that only finite subjects can have, which means that Spinoza's rationalism is only fully realizable in a world where there are finite subjects—in particular, humans.

Without questioning the fundamental rationalist claim that being is universally intelligible, Spinoza thus uses these two propositions to test the limits of the notion of infinite knowledge that had helped him to justify this claim in the first place. He demonstrates that some instances of our knowledge do not follow solely from the idea of God: we cannot have, merely by means of a priori deduction, any knowledge of those things that in and by themselves depend on historical circumstances.

7. Maybe this is how qualia ought to be understood. This is certainly worth discussing. I am not, however, arguing against the existence of qualia altogether but merely against the notion that they involve a fundamental lack of third-person knowability.

*a) Enduring Ideas of Enduring Things: Knowledge
of the Existence of Singular Things and Its
Empirical Origin*

In 2p8c, Spinoza distinguishes between two ways in which we can attribute existence to singular things (*res singulares*): either they exist only insofar as they are intelligible, which is to say insofar as their idea is contained in the idea of God, or they exist insofar as they are said to have duration.⁸ This distinction is crucial for several of Spinoza's key points. Whereas 2p8 itself is more or less functionless for later stages of the argument,⁹ several central passages of the *Ethics* refer back to 2p8c. Among these are 2p9, which deals with the causation of singular ideas; 2p11, where the concept of the human mind is first introduced, albeit in a preliminary way; 2p45, which explains why finite minds can have intuitive knowledge; and finally parts of the discussion of the eternity of the human mind.¹⁰ It is also conspicuous that what is relevant for most of these references is the second half of the corollary. Apparently, Spinoza is much more interested here in the enduring ideas of enduring things than in the "merely" intelligible ideas of nonexistent things.

Yet, it is not superfluous to assume that the ideas of nonexistent singular things are also contained in the idea of God—such an assumption more or less completes the panorama of our possible thoughts.¹¹ Let us assume that the idea of God does indeed, as suggested above, constitute a claim as to the intelligibility of being. In that case, ideas of nonexistent singular things that are contained in God

8. See C I, 452; G II, 91: "From this it follows that so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God's attributes, their objective being, or ideas, do not exist except insofar as God's infinite idea exists. And when singular things are said to exist, not only insofar as they are comprehended in God's attributes, but insofar also as they are said to have duration, their ideas also involve the existence through which they are said to have duration."

9. Spinoza refers to 2p8 only in 2p8c and 2p8s, and there is no argument linking 2p8 and 2p8c so that 2p8 itself serves at most as a conceptual background. The reference to 2p8 is designed exclusively to present the alternative to the concept of duration developed in 2p8c. On the other hand, 2p8s merely illustrates the distinction made in 2p8c. Thus, 2p8 has no argumentative function for 2p8s either.

10. That these theorems concerning intuitive knowledge and the eternity of the human mind also depend on 2p8c, rather than on 2p8, is also confirmed by Moreau's rejection of Wolfson's Averroist reading of Spinoza's doctrine of eternity (see Moreau 1994a, 535–6, footnote 5). In line with Moreau's own interpretation of this doctrine, Spinoza displays no interest at all in eliminating individual differences; on the contrary, he relies only on the complete knowledge of individual determinedness.

11. See Yakira 1994, 165. By the way, Yakira's analysis shows that Spinoza's logical distinctions are more subtle than commonly believed. In this, he comes to the same result as Schütt 1985, whose analysis of Spinoza's modal theory was mentioned earlier.

simply correspond to ideas we have when we speculate about things whose existence is uncertain, while we cannot rule out their existence a priori. We can ask ourselves, for instance, if our galaxy contains other solar systems with conditions similar to our own. In Spinoza's time, people would still have speculated about the seventh planet,¹² which immediately underlines the importance of these kinds of ideas. It is not out of the question that astronomers will one day find further celestial bodies in our solar system of whose existence we currently have no evidence. Thus, if we want to continue assuming that being is intelligible, the ideas of merely hypothetical objects must be intelligible too. The example of discovering new celestial bodies also shows that intelligibility is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for its being the case that certain things actually exist, in a relevant sense of the word.¹³ If someone proclaims the existence of a new planet, we expect her to actually identify that celestial body and not just to prove its possibility.

In 2p8 and 2p8c, Spinoza tries to take these ordinary expectations concerning the modality of things into account. He does so by taking recourse to a notion defined in 2def5: the notion of duration. According to this definition, duration is "an indefinite continuation of existing," which quite clearly presupposes that duration is a property of existing things.¹⁴

Two things are remarkable about this definition. First, it is striking that there is no mention of any *temporal* limit of the existence of things, although the concept of duration is obviously intended to account for the specifically temporal existence of singular things, for only singular things do not derive their existence—be it directly or indirectly—from the definition of an eternal thing.¹⁵ Second, it is notable that the definition contains an implicitly epistemic element in the term "indefinite": enduring things are those whose duration of existence remains

12. Although Uranus, the seventh planet of our solar system, had been discovered much earlier, it wasn't until 1781 that it was identified as a planet by astronomer William Herschel.

13. Della Rocca neglects this point when he interprets Spinoza as saying not only that existence is intelligible but also that existence can be reduced to intelligibility (2003a).

14. This follows from the explication of 2def5, which states, "I say indefinite because it cannot be determined at all through the very nature of the existing thing, nor even by the efficient cause, which necessarily posits the existence of the thing, and does not take it away" (C I, 447; G II, 85).

15. See also the definition of "eternity" in 1def8, which counteracts the concept of "duration": "By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing" (C I, 409; G II, 46). Note that this allows for the possibility that there are eternal truths even about finite things. As Moreau (1994a, 511) has shown, Spinoza distinguishes between "being eternal" and "being an eternal truth." This shows that, aside from eternal things and noneternal things, there can also be eternal truths about noneternal things.

unknown to us. These two points suggest a very specific understanding of what it means for singular things to be finite: what determines the finitude of dependent beings is not their temporal limitation but the *fundamental uncertainty of their existence*. Enduring things are things for which it is less than self-evident that and why they exist. Thus, duration features in the existence of particulars (i.e., things that can be multiply instanced), which can also be destroyed by other things.¹⁶

Strictly speaking, 2p8c merely explicates the epistemic element that is already implied in the definition of duration. As suggested by the explication to 2def5, we owe the knowledge that an enduring thing exists neither to the definition of the thing itself nor to our knowledge of its causes. What Spinoza says in 2p8c is no different: we have ideas of enduring singular things, not only insofar as we assume that they are contained in the idea of God but also insofar as we attribute duration to the things which they represent. The formulation “not only . . . but also” suggests that this sentence has a twofold significance: on the one hand, it guarantees that enduring singular things too can be considered intelligible; on the other hand, it makes clear that their existence cannot be reduced to their intelligibility.

We can therefore conclude that the *Ethics* makes two simultaneous assumptions: it holds that singular things are intelligible, while cautioning at the same time that this cannot be a sufficient condition for saying that something actually is enduring or does exist. This largely corresponds to the common view that calculations of planetary orbits justify the actual existence of a planet only if that planet is also successfully identified. Applied to Spinoza’s model, this leads us to reject the commonly held belief that Spinoza deduces all his wisdom from the concept of God. This is not what he does in 2p8c, nor would he want to. On the contrary, it is nowhere as clear as in 2p8c that the notion of an *idea Dei* is used merely to articulate a hypothetical precondition for Spinoza’s realist rationalism. Spinoza needs this notion in order to maintain the general intelligibility of those things whose existence is neither known nor dismissible with certainty.

What does this ultimately involve for our concrete knowledge of the existence of singular things? *How* do we know, in other words, if a thing whose existence is conceivable actually exists? In 2p8c he gives only a provisional answer to this question. We can safely rule out that it is the idea of God to which we owe our knowledge of the existence of enduring things—after all, to attribute duration to things means precisely that we do not derive their existence from the idea of

16. See also Jaquet 1999, 189. Note that later passages of the *Ethics*—in particular those presenting Spinoza’s social philosophy and his views on the eternity of the mind—rely heavily on this understanding of finitude as fundamentally insecure existence.

God.¹⁷ But that tells us nothing about the actual origin of our ideas of enduring things. The only thing that 2p8c allows us to say is that these ideas, as well as the existence of their objects, depend on external causes. Spinoza is therefore right when he says that we must think of these ideas as enduring entities as well. This is perfectly plausible if we consider what we said earlier about the concept of duration: if the ideas of enduring things cannot be derived from the idea of God, then their existence is just as unclear as the existence of lasting things.

Our analysis of 2p8c can thus be summarized as follows: Spinoza's point, in this corollary, is not simply that it is impossible to understand the human soul as something that can be detached from the body—and therefore as an absolutely eternal being.¹⁸ Rather, his goal is to show that our knowledge of the existence of singular things—ourselves included—must have empirical origins.¹⁹

One might wonder whether this insight does not contradict the claim, made in 2p3, that all being is generally intelligible. Spinoza does not seem to think so. Strictly speaking, the corollary merely maintains that the existence of those things which are represented by enduring ideas cannot be reduced to their being intelligible. It is still possible that the idea of an enduring thing is identical to an idea representing the very thing within the idea of God, yet merely as an intelligible entity. This option is underlined by 2p8s, where Spinoza compares the ideas of singular things to rectangles contained in a circle. There is only one difference between the rectangle constructed from drawn segments and the infinitely many rectangles we can imagine by envisioning segments that have not yet been drawn: the difference is simply that the segments in the first case have been drawn, whereas, in the second, they have not.

Admittedly, this difference is rather small. And it would be completely negligible if we were talking about something other than the existence of the rectangle—for instance, its circumference. But there must be a reason Spinoza chooses to illustrate his answer with this image (which, as he says explicitly, is not an example). Apparently, he was fully aware of how narrow the line between idealism and skepticism becomes at this point: whereas an idealist position relinquishes the difference between intelligibility and existence, an ultimately skeptical attitude maintains that the existence of singular things is a brute fact that we can merely register but not explain. Once we inquire into the intelligibility of

17. See Bartuschat (1992a, 87), whose reconstruction reaches a similar conclusion.

18. This has become the classic interpretation, one exemplary proponent being Gueroult 1974, 95.

19. Sprigge 1997, 10–1, has also pointed out that a non-*a priori* foundation of knowledge is necessary for Spinoza.

singular things, the argumentative space between these two positions becomes quite narrow. Still, it is not so narrow as to prevent us from stating the simple fact that geometrical figures are calculable and that they can also be drawn.

*b) The Intelligibility of Events, or the Necessity of
a View from Nowhere*

As the reconstruction of 2p8c has shown, our knowledge of the existence of singular things depends on external causes. In 2p9, Spinoza discusses the causation of these kinds of ideas for the first time; or, more precisely, he shows how the causation of our ideas of singular things cannot be accounted for. On the one hand, he rules out that ideas could have causes outside of the attribute of thought. If 2p9d is correct in stating that ideas are singular modes in the attribute of thought, then they are simply not of the kind that allows them to causally interact with modes of other attributes. Thus, ideas can never be caused by modes of extension, which includes the things that they represent and any physiological processes that accompany them.²⁰

On the other hand, the proposition also undermines the view that ideas of singular things can be produced directly by God or the infinite intellect. To quote the thesis laid out in 2p9: “The idea of a singular thing which actually exists has God for a cause not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing which actually exists; and of this [idea] God is also the cause, insofar as he is affected by another third [idea], and so on, to infinity.”²¹ Here, Spinoza opposes the view that God, or the infinite intellect, has a direct influence on our ideas, while embracing the conception of a causal chain extending into infinity. Support comes from 1p28, which says that the existence of singular things cannot be caused by the direct influence of infinite modes; rather, it is caused by causal connections between finite modes, which extend to infinity. In 2p9, this assumption of a causal chain that extends into infinity becomes a model for the causation of ideas, especially ideas that we use to refer to enduring things. These ideas, too, will therefore owe their existence to a causal connection between such ideas, which means that they cannot be produced directly by the infinite intellect. Ultimately, it is this meta-theoretical

20. “The idea of a singular thing which actually exists is a singular mode of thinking, and distinct from the others (by P8C and P8S), and so (by P6) has God for a cause only insofar as he is a thinking thing” (C I, 453; G II, 92). In 2p6, Spinoza had already denied any causal interaction with modes of other attributes, with 2p9dem serving as a reminder.

21. C I, 453; G II, 91–2.

consideration that informs the formulaic distinction between “God insofar as he is infinite” and “God insofar as he is affected by finite modes.”²²

If we assume that ideas of singular things cannot be directly caused by the infinite intellect, the spectrum of what can actually be known in individual cases becomes considerably restricted. Spinoza himself mentions the most decisive restriction in the corollary to 2p9, where he writes, “Whatever happens in the singular object of any idea, there is knowledge of it in God, only insofar as he has the idea of the same object.”²³

We can illustrate what this means by reflecting on the following four points:

1. As already discussed, 2p9c relies on 2p3. In both instances, we should abstain from relying on theological interpretations. The corollary does not tell us anything about God’s knowledge; it rather discusses under which conditions things are intelligible. This is underlined by 2p9c itself, which refers to anything (*quidquid*) that might happen in the object of any (*cuiuscunque*) idea. Thus, what is at issue here is the intelligibility of things and not the knowledge of God.
2. Unlike 2p3, 2p9c says nothing about the universal intelligibility of beings in general. The corollary only focuses on the intelligibility of whatever happens in the object of a singular idea (which, according to 2p8c, is equivalent to the idea of singular things). Thus, 2p9c is concerned with the intelligibility of a specific type of being. What kind of entities these are becomes clear as soon as we remember that, for metaphysical reasons, Spinoza rejects the notion of a vacuum. This being the case, the predicate “happens in a singular object” must be applicable to all events.²⁴ In an ontology that knows no empty space,

22. On several other occasions, Spinoza will use formulations such as this. See, for instance, 2p9c, 2p11c, and 2p12dem. Standard commentaries often simply ignore the point at which this juxtaposition makes its first appearance, in 2p9. But when they decide to comment on it, they often interpret it as a sign of transition (see Gueroult 1974, 104–5; Macherey 1997a, 93–4) or as an indication that the theoretical perspective has changed (see especially Bartuschat 1992a, 87–8). This isn’t wrong, but it underestimates the argument at the core of this switch. By using the aforementioned formula, Spinoza also indicates *why* the following problems must be tackled on a different level. When Matheron (1969, 291) talks about individuals endowed with a *conatus*, calling them *Deus quatenus* (“God insofar as”), I think he may have been inspired by this type of formulation. In my view, his comparison is somewhat incorrect. When Spinoza uses the *quatenus* phrase, he does so to focus on the limitation imposed on singular things or ideas from other singular things or ideas. His concern here is not with their self-preservation.

23. C I, 454; G II, 92.

24. See DPP 2p3 (C I, 268; G I, 188) and 1p15s (C I, 423; G II, 59), where Spinoza reviews Descartes’ claim that there can be no vacuum, showing that, on an ontological level, this makes a substance monism necessary.

the statement that something happens in a singular thing is a universal claim holding for all events.

3. But 2p9c does not simply talk about what happens in singular things but what happens in the *objects* of the ideas of singular things. Thus, the things in which something happens are considered only insofar as they are the object of an idea, the content of a thought. That is to say, the focus of 2p9c is not on events in general but on events happening in a place that is epistemically accessible. One of the implicit points of 2p9c, then, is that events can be known precisely to the extent to which the place where they come to pass is epistemically accessible. Whether there are other kinds of events remains undecided.
4. Unlike 2p3, 2p9c does not merely talk about the *idea* but about an instance of *knowledge*, *cognitio*, that necessarily exists in God. This is not a categorical difference since, for Spinoza, ideas always also constitute knowledge.²⁵ But it is striking that this change in terminology is accompanied by a change in context. As the proof makes clear, the idea of an object in which something happens is not an idea of God “insofar as he is infinite” but only “insofar as he has the idea of the same object.”²⁶ If the place where these events happen is epistemically accessible, it is so not on account of an absolute but on account of a limited, local knowledge.

In summary, we can say that, in 2p9c, Spinoza lays out the epistemic conditions under which events can be known on an individual basis. His central claim is that events can be known if and only if the place where they occur can be accessed by an epistemic subject which is itself locally situated or whose knowledge has made the place epistemically accessible. 2p9c does not tell us what exactly we are to make of this epistemic access. But, it seems, Spinoza thinks that individual events can be explained only from a definite historically determined standpoint, not from an absolute point of view. Thus, it could be said that 2p9c regionalizes Spinoza’s chief rationalist tenet, which declares that all being can be known universally. This also makes it clear that the knowledge of events is not simply a matter of assigning them absolute coordinates—coordinates that an omniscient observer would carry in his mind. This kind of knowledge always depends on how the situation is viewed by someone with a very specific, historically situated perspective. In other words, events can be known only by a *view from somewhere*.

It can hardly be overestimated how important this is for the *Ethics* as a whole. Here, Spinoza distances himself more clearly than ever from certain associations

25. See also my remarks about the aspect dualism of act and content in Part II, Chapter 5, § b.

26. C I, 454; G II, 92.

linked to the idea of an infinite intellect. Not only does his approach abstain from saying that a single epistemic subject has—or could have—all knowledge; he also implicitly dismisses the claim that there could ever be such an omniscient subject. For if there are entities that can only be known from a *view from somewhere*, a view that only historically determined subjects can have, then it must be impossible for anyone to have knowledge of everything by adopting a *view from nowhere*.²⁷

Just like 2p8c, 2p9c shows that some insights—insights that happen to be crucial for the understanding of human experience—cannot be derived from the idea of God. But does this not amount to questioning the claim that experience is explainable? I do not think so. One must keep in mind here that this claim merely voices the principal demand for complete explainability; it does not concern its implementation. It is one thing to justify this demand but another to show how it can be realized. If, moreover, we assume that experience occurs in finite, epistemically accessible things, then there is no reason to believe that the said limitation should undermine the claim that experience is explainable. Yet, what a thing's epistemic accessibility depends on is not even at issue at this point.

All that Spinoza could be accused of here is that he omits the issue of events happening in objects that are not epistemically accessible. According to 2p9c, we must assume either that such events simply do not exist or that they exist but remain unknowable. As far as our question is concerned, this problem can safely be disregarded, for events that occur in places that are not epistemically accessible are of no relevance for the question of experience. Nobody will label something an experience that leaves no trace at all in anyone's knowledge, be it directly or indirectly. This also holds true for the results of a lively imagination.

27. Thus, 2p9c confirms our previous interpretation of 2p4: when Spinoza claims that there can be only one idea of God, he does not envision a single omniscient subject but rather a single adequate concept of reality. See Part I, Chapter 3, § c.

The Definition of the Human Mind in Its Derivation

UP TO THIS point, we have focused exclusively on the question of the intelligibility of being, whereas the conditions enabling subjects to acquire knowledge have been largely left aside. From 2def3, we know that ideas can exist only if they are formed by a *res cogitans*. But, as we have seen from our analysis of the concept of idea, this is not to say that ideas are formed in a spontaneous act; it only means that there is always a thinking being that actually has them.¹ Yet, the very nature of this relation between ideas and a subject that has them has not so far been explored. This changes with 2p11. This proposition, which provides a first, still provisional definition of the concept of the human mind, is the first passage of the *Ethics* that explicitly discusses the subjective conditions of knowledge.

But prior to this, 2p10 and 2p10c recall the general ontological framework established in Part One of the *Ethics*. While 2p10 states that “[t]he being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man,”² 2p10c maintains that “the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of God’s attributes.”³ The thrust of these two theses is clear: here, Spinoza distances himself from both Cartesian and Thomist–Aristotelian conceptions of the soul or of the essence of being human—two conceptions that have different ways of promoting the idea of a self-contained, substantial unity. Spinoza focuses instead on the concrete constitution of the human being. Notice, however, that 2p10 and 2p10c operate on

1. See also Part II, Chapter 5, §§ a and c.

2. C I, 454; G II, 92: “The being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or substance does not constitute the form of man.”

3. C I, 454; G II, 93: “From this it follows that the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of God’s attributes.”

the same meta-theoretical level as Spinoza's metaphysics in general: although it states that the essence of being human is constituted by certain modes of God, 2p10c must not be read as providing a theory about the manner of the actual constitution of humans. The corollary merely *maintains that* humans are modally constituted, but it does not *explain how* this constitution of human being comes to pass. To account for the latter, the reader must rely on additional analyses, for instance, physical–physiological, psychological, sociopolitical, and epistemic analyses.⁴

Thus, the statement that something is a mode in the attribute of thought more or less necessitates further assumptions. Of course, this also holds true for the human mind. As 2p11d makes clear (with recourse to 2p10c), the human mind is also a mode in the attribute of thought. This is the first explicit statement to the effect that the human mind falls under the category of dependent beings.⁵ In other words, the human mind is also subject to the causal influence of other modes of the same attribute, which is precisely why further inquiries into the nature and constitution of human thought are required. These inquiries will occur in the second half of Part Two as well as Parts Three and Four of the *Ethics*.

But there are a few problems that 2p10c poses for the conception of the human mind, and these problems must be discussed first. For instance, the modal status of the human essence raises the issue of the status of the human subject or, more generally, of human agency. What does it mean to say that the human mind is a mode? And what does this entail for its ability to control the content of its thoughts? Also, this is where the real challenge of Spinoza's ontological monism becomes apparent. If the human mind can no longer be considered a substance, it is no longer clear that different people are also numerically different subjects. Or to put it in ontological terms, if humans are no longer different substances or substantial units, then the difference between them is merely modal. But as we have seen,⁶ the concepts of modal difference and physical individuality are both incapable of accounting for the fact that different people are different subjects and remain so even if they become part of social organizations. How is Spinoza supposed to account for the numerical difference between subjects?

4. Gueroult 1974, 111, in particular has shown that, in 2p10, Spinoza distances himself from Descartes and Thomas. Giovannoni 1999, 10–1, is correct in emphasizing that the idea of a concrete constitution of finite beings is crucial for Spinoza's critique of Descartes. However, I disagree with Giovannoni in pointing out, above, that the *Ethics* uses the terms *constitutio* and *constitui* in an operational sense, which is to say that it refers to constitutional relations which, for the time being, still stand in need of detailed explanation.

5. See also Part I, Chapter 2, § c.

6. See Part I, Chapter 8.

I will address this question by proposing a reading of propositions 2p11 to 2p13. I will show that this notoriously obscure passage becomes much clearer once we take it as a comment on this problem. In 2p11 and 2p11c, Spinoza examines the thesis that humans have a modal constitution, exploring its impact on the essence and content of the human mind; in 2p12 and 2p13, he explains how the mind must be taken to operate and how this helps to retain the conviction that we are numerically different subjects, or subjects capable of ascribing certain experiences to ourselves while denying them of others. Note that this entire passage is enormously dense. No other passage in the *Ethics* contains as many strategic decisions as this one—which, not incidentally, deals with the conception of the human mind.

Furthermore, there is something to be said about the premises on which Spinoza relies in these propositions. If we disregard 2p10c, which merely recites the general ontological framework laid out in Part One, the demonstrations to propositions 2p11 to 2p13 exclusively refer to corollaries 2p8c and 2p9c, as well as to the axioms of Part Two. Now, these axioms, to which Spinoza refers here with quite some frequency, are of a very particular kind. Aside from 2ax1, which offers a succinct history lesson, all other axioms indirectly voice phenomenological facts. These phenomenological facts also inform the Cartesian and Thomist or Aristotelian conception of the human mind—but in Spinoza's axioms, they are presented as very general, conceptually primitive truths. If we take a closer look at how the text employs these axioms, moreover, we get the impression that Spinoza attempts to show, in an implicit dialogue with the reader, how his approach allows certain phenomenological facts to be taken into account.⁷ The result is a conception of the human mind which, while reflecting the presuppositions entailed in Spinoza's ontology of the mental, also justifies the intuitions underlying our everyday practice of assigning particular actions and experience to individual subjects.

Over the next few pages, I will reconstruct the different stages of this argument and take a closer look at the associated theoretical decisions. First I will show how Spinoza opposes the view of the human mind as a bearer of mental states, by positing that the mind itself is also only a singular idea (a). Then, I will analyze 2p11c in order to discuss what that means for the contents of the mind. The result will be a highly unorthodox reconstruction of the thesis

7. It's no hermeneutic novelty to claim that Spinoza's arguments sometimes read like implicit dialogues. In his interpretation of 5p23s, Moreau (1994a, 541) points out that this passage can be understood only if we think of it as a dialogue with someone who has already understood the second part of the *Ethics*. When Schnepf (1996, 133) interprets Spinoza's definitions, he too argues that the "geometrical method" should be considered a process reminiscent of a dialogue. Also keep in mind the discussion of the definition of idea, in Part I, Chapter 2, § a.

that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect (b). This is followed by an equally unusual interpretation of 2p12, which culminates in a discussion about the meaning of the statement that a thing has experiences (c). The final step will be an analysis of 2p13 and the view expressed therein regarding the numerical difference between subjects (d).

Just a brief remark before we begin. Many readers may not find here what they expect from a commentary on Spinoza's famous thesis that the human mind is the idea of the body. That is why I would like to ask my readers for the same courtesy Spinoza asks his, in 2p11s: that they "continue with me slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all."⁸

a) The Actual Being of the Mind: The Mind Is Knowledge and Not Bearer of Knowledge

2p11 is the first proposition in which Spinoza explicitly addresses the human mind, the topic whose proper explanation was promised us at the beginning of Part Two. The proposition reads as follows:

The first thing which constitutes the actual being of a human mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists.⁹

In this passage, Spinoza equates the actual being of the human mind—in later references to 2p11, he speaks also of the essence of the mind¹⁰—with the idea of an actually existing singular thing. Clearly, the emphasis here is on the formal essence of the idea constituting the mind: it is asserted that the mind, considered in its actual being, is an idea and an idea of a specific type—it is one of those enduring ideas of existing singular things that were first mentioned in 2p8c. For now, the content of this idea remains undetermined. But, no later than in the second half of 2p11d, we are told why it must be an idea of an enduring thing and why it cannot be otherwise.

8. C I, 456; G II, 95: "Here, no doubt, my readers will come to a halt, and think of many things which will give them pause. For this reason I ask them to continue with me slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all."

9. C I 456; G II, 94. Here, as in other places, I do not follow Curley in capitalizing the word "mind."

10. For example, in 3p3, 4p37, 5p9, and 5p38. See also Macherey 1997a, 104.

This thesis has considerable implications. First, it denies that the human mind can be immortal, which is significant mostly in terms of tradition.¹¹ Second, and more importantly, it is implied that the human mind *qua* idea is in its very essence characterized by intentionality. That means it consists in thinking *of* something, having knowledge *of* something, or mentally referring *to* something.

In terms of both today's intuitions and the historical background, this is rather unusual. We normally assume that the mind relates to things in what it *does*—that is, in its capacities to represent, know, and feel—but not in what it *is*. In other words, we implicitly distinguish between the entity that has a certain cognition and the cognition itself. Most of Spinoza's contemporaries also made this distinction, and, judging from the objections to Descartes' *Meditations* (which had already been published at this point), it was also employed by various philosophers. For instance, both Hobbes' objection to Cartesian substance dualism and Descartes' own response to this objection appeal to this very difference. Both opponents see a categorical difference between these two things: on the one hand, there are activities and abilities; on the other hand, there is the thing that performs these activities or has these abilities and that forms the *subjectum* in which they inhere.¹²

In 2p11, Spinoza denies the implicit claim that there exists such a difference, and he denies it on a fundamental level. The human mind cannot be categorically separated from the thoughts or ideas which it discovers within itself. Thus, it can be considered neither the bearer nor the principle of our thoughts. With this implicit rejection of Descartes' and Hobbes' model of the mind as a vehicle, Spinoza comes close to anticipating Gilbert Ryle's critique of the "Cartesian myth," which Ryle also denounces as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine."¹³ Ryle's target here is not simply Cartesian dualism; he cautions that anyone who maintains that the mind is the occult principle or cause behind a human being's observable behavior commits a category mistake. Similarly, 2p11 tries to delegitimize any conception of the mind as something which is acting *behind* the ideas. The thing that thinks when we discover certain thoughts within us is the human being as a whole, including his corporeal existence and his social network. It is no accident that the axiom by which Spinoza posits human thought as a fact does *not* read

11. Gueroult 1974, 118.

12. See CSM II, 121–4; AT VII, 172–6. Of course, there is a difference between Descartes and Hobbes: for Hobbes, only the body is considered a subject, whereas the mind belongs to the level of properties; for Descartes, both the body and the mind belong to the level of subjects.

13. See Ryle 1949, 16 ff. Does Ryle's image of the Cartesian myth do justice to the real Descartes? I shall not discuss this here.

“the mind thinks” or “I think” (which would be closer to Descartes’ *Meditations*) but simply “Man thinks.”

But unlike the philosophers of language who criticize Cartesian mentalism, 2p11 does not stop at destroying the “Cartesian myth.” Instead, the proposition proposes an alternative concept of the mind: even though the human mind may not be the substantial bearer or principle of knowledge, its essence can still consist in human cognition. Spinoza therefore commits himself to a kind of cognitivist approach. It is already clear from 2ax3 that Spinoza has a positive view of cognitivism as far as the emotions are concerned. According to this axiom, every affect presupposes the idea of the thing to which the affect refers.¹⁴ Whatever a person feels apparently depends on his ideas or thoughts. If the person has an idea of something he finds desirable, he will desire it. If he thinks that something is lovable, he will love it. This kind of approach is quite plausible—as long as it is not meant to explain *why* we consider something particularly lovable or desirable—or even why we love and desire in the first place.¹⁵

In 2p11dem, Spinoza refers to this axiom—and not only once but twice. When he does so the first time, he uses it in conjunction with 2ax2, which states that humans think. By doing so, he claims that the cognitivism that seemed so plausible with regard to specific emotions can also serve as a theoretical background for his conception of the human mind. The first recourse to 2ax3 suggests the following: whenever humans think, there must be certain ideas at work—just as was the case with the affects.

In addition to this, 2ax3 draws our attention to a structural precondition for this kind of cognitivism. The idea underlying a particular emotion must be “in the same individual” as the one that has the corresponding affect. In and by itself, this seems trivial: if we specify certain mental states by referring to certain ideas or cognitions, then it seems self-evident that it is the same individual who has these ideas. If we were to explain Peter’s love for Petra by referring to an idea of Petra as a lovable person, then we assume that it must be Peter who has this idea. In the context of Spinoza’s approach, however, this is less trivial. For if we follow Spinoza in implicitly rejecting the categorical difference between thoughts and

14. Also see Part II, Chapter 5.

15. And this is not the case in Spinoza. He addresses both questions in his theory of affects, but not before. The first question is answered when he explains the genesis of the secondary affects, the second when he discusses the primary affects. See Part IV, Chapter 13. Thus, by organizing the text so that there is a distinction between different theoretical levels, Spinoza implicitly recognizes the distinction between origin and formal object. Consequently, his naturalism is immune to the error neurophysiologists are prone to commit, according to Bennett and Hacker 2003, 206–7. Also, consider Husserl’s lectures *Erste Philosophie* from 1923/24, Husserl 1950, vol. VII–VIII.

their bearer (see the discussion above), then we must ask ourselves how we are to think of Peter's mind as an individual mind in the first place.

In 2p11, Spinoza does not yet answer this question. But in 2p11d, he says explicitly that he wishes to retain the notion of individual subjects. He postulates, for instance, that "the other modes (to which the idea is prior in nature) must be in the same individual,"¹⁶ and he does so by making another reference to 2ax3, right after he has mentioned that axiom for the first time. Thus, 2p11 continues the tendency (which began in 2p8c and 2p9c) to analyze human thought as it is empirically given: ideas are not simply in the world; they always occur in the thought of particular subjects. Contrary to the traditional view that Spinozism eliminates all individual subjectivity, the *Ethics* actually holds that feelings and thoughts must always be ascribed to numerically distinguishable individuals.

We should also mention another aspect: as shown by the two references to 2ax3, Spinoza assumes that the idea which the mind itself *is*, is by nature prior to the *modi cogitandi* which it *has*. As we discussed, Spinoza sees no categorical difference between the mind and the thoughts we have; yet, he also thinks that, in concrete cases, we can nonetheless distinguish between the two levels. Clearly, he assumes that the idea which constitutes the mind itself precedes the ideas which we ascribe to it and that the mind is in a certain sense more fundamental than the ideas that make up its states.

What distinguishes his approach from those of his predecessors, Descartes' in particular, is that Spinoza rejects certain requirements that go along with categorizing singular minds as substances. Aside from the question of the immortality of the soul, which we have already mentioned, we should especially focus on the following. Reacting to Hobbes' objection to the idea of a mental substance, Descartes points out that categorizing the human mind as a substance implies that the mind itself cannot be known directly. Spinoza seems to share this view when he says, in 2p23, that the mind knows itself only insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body.¹⁷

But, at second glance, it becomes clear that 2p23's statement about the limited knowability of the mind is based on different premises. If the human mind cannot know itself without difficulties, it is not because its ontological status renders it absolutely unknowable. Rather, it is because we as subjects can know something only if we are affected by external bodies. As a consequence, we have only a vague perception of the boundaries of our own body—therefore, we also distinguish

16. C, 456; G II, 94.

17. C I, 468; G II, 110: "The mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body."

our mind only vaguely from the ideas that it has. Thus, the only way for us to clearly differentiate between ourselves and other things is through inferences. For Spinoza, then, the limits set upon the self-knowledge of the mind are epistemological, not ontological, which means that they are not based on a view of the mind as an invisible and intangible self. Also, these limitations are neither total nor absolutely insurmountable. Spinoza merely denies that we have at our immediate disposal an adequate (i.e., complete) concept of ourselves. But he does not deny that we are immediately aware of certain of our properties, nor does he categorically rule out the possibility that we can ever have adequate knowledge of ourselves.¹⁸

Compared to Descartes, Spinoza offers a different account and rationale of why human self-knowledge is conditioned and limited—and this difference is crucial for the project of the *Ethics*. We may not possess an immediate and adequate knowledge of our body or our mind. But we may still know ourselves with a level of precision that is sufficient for everyday use. In addition, the outlined view is fully compatible with our having adequate knowledge of certain mental and physical properties, as well as with our constant acquisition of further adequate knowledge about ourselves. Thus, an improvement of human self-knowledge is possible up to the point of a complete understanding. As we have seen, Spinoza maintains that there is no categorical difference between the idea that the mind itself *is* and the ideas that it *has*; and, especially in this context, it is an attractive option to assume that it is possible for us to constantly perfect our self-knowledge. For as we will see in sections c and d, the idea that constitutes the mind is also a kind of knowledge we have of ourselves. Against this background, it is at least in principle plausible to assume that any acquired knowledge of who or what we are finds expression in the knowledge that our mind itself is. In other words, it is conceivable that adequate knowledge becomes habitual and that this leads to changes in the actual being of the mind.

b) The Contents of the Mind: Holism and Adequacy, or the Human Mind as Part of the Infinite Intellect

As should be clear from previous passages, I proceed from the assumption that, in the *Ethics* God is not conceived of as an epistemic subject. I would like to recall two instances previously brought up to argue for the plausibility of this claim. The first was in my reconstruction of the justification for Spinoza's rationalism.

18. For the epistemological context, see also Part IV, Chapter 14.

I argued that when Spinoza says that there is this or that idea in God, he means to make a statement about the fundamental intelligibility either of being in general or—depending on the context—of particular things.¹⁹ Second, I focused on formulations such as “God has a specific idea, not insofar as he is infinite but insofar as he is affected by certain modes in the attribute of thought.” I argued that these kinds of formulations do not actually address God as an epistemic subject but rather address a historical individual.²⁰

This should lead us to reconsider 2p11c, which states that “the human mind is a part of the infinite intellect of God.”²¹ This should not be taken to mean, as is often suggested, that it is God, or the infinite intellect, that has the idea that constitutes the mind of an individual human being, rather than that individual human being itself.²² On the contrary, as I will explain in the section after next, the idea that constitutes the human mind is among the ideas that humans have of themselves. It is therefore a kind of self-knowledge. In this section, I suggest an alternative reconstruction of 2p11c, which shows that there is no reason to adopt the most common reading, according to which God is the true subject of our mental activities.

First, it is worth taking a closer look at what is implied by the claim that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect. In the second part of the corollary, Spinoza lays out these implications as follows:

Therefore, when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human mind, *or* insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind, has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind, then we say that the human mind perceives the thing only partially, *or* inadequately.²³

19. See Part II, Chapter 6, § b.

20. See Chapter 9, § b, of this current part.

21. C I, 456; G II, 94.

22. Many commentators tacitly endorse this reading, for instance Bennett 1984, 177, and Bartuschat 1992a, 82–3. Explicit endorsement is given by Gueroult 1974, 127; Schrijvers 1989, 25; Della Rocca 1996b, 54; Kisser 1998; Wilson 1999, 128; and Schnepf 1999, 147. Not everything that follows from this reading is wrong. But Spinoza's justification for many of these consequences is slightly different from what these authors assume.

23. C I, 456; G II, 94–5.

It is not immediately clear what this passage is all about. If we look closely, however, three points take shape:

1. Both parts operate on a meta-linguistic level. Obviously, the corollary refrains from assuming a causal relation between God and the human mind; it merely points out semantic equivalences between certain expressions. It shows how a number of everyday phrases should be translated into the terminology Spinoza had introduced earlier. Conspicuously, the passage says nothing about the notion of infinite intellect *per se*—it speaks only about God, insofar he is expressed by certain finite modes in the attribute of thought.
2. The first part establishes a terminological equivalence which immediately follows from the claim that the mind is part of the infinite intellect. This equivalence is said to persist not between the parts “God *has* a certain idea *x*” and “The human mind *consists* of a certain idea *x*” but between “God, insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind, *has* the idea of *y* or *z*” and “The human mind *perceives* *y* or *z*.” Thus, the topic of 2p11c is not the idea that *constitutes* the human mind but the ideas that a human being *has*. The corollary does not simply continue the argument of 2p11, which dealt with the actual being of the human mind. It discusses the consequences following from the claim made therein—that the mind itself is an idea—for the question of human perception.
3. In the passage quoted above, Spinoza does not simply say that the human mind has some unspecified ideas but that it perceives “this or that,” *hoc vel illud*. This suggests that these parts are less concerned with the psychological process of human perception than they are with giving a first account of how the *contents* of perception are determined.²⁴

We can draw the following conclusions from these three points. When Spinoza claims that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect, he says nothing about *who the actual perceiver is* when we perceive or *how* the human mind perceives. Rather, the corollary explains the means by which *it is determined what exactly we see* when we perceive. For the first time, we catch a glimpse of an important characteristic of Spinoza’s approach: Spinoza frequently discusses human perception from a semantic perspective. The question is not how we perceive but what we perceive or why we perceive certain things as such and such. Overall, we can

24. In contrast to Macherey 1997a, 109–10, I do not think that 2p11c, when dealing with the idea constituting the mind, focuses on its formal being—or, as Macherey says, on its activity. Bartuschat 1992b, 507, in contrast, when commenting on Spinoza’s claim that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect, puts the focus on the *esse objective* of the ideas involved.

say that Spinoza frequently displays a tendency to semanticize the psychological. He does not go so far as to transpose all psychological problems into semantic ones. But the *Ethics* does sometimes address the question of how the contents of psychic experience are determined by appealing to insights that we would today consider semantic in nature. 2p11c lays the foundation for this approach.

What, then, are the concrete results of Spinoza's considerations? To answer this question, we must realize that the metaphor of "being a part" gives expression not to the *exclusive* relation of the human mind to the infinite intellect but to the *inclusive* mutual relation among various parts. Thus, Spinoza advocates a semantic holism when it comes to the question of how the contents of our thoughts are determined. The point of 2p11c is this: what we know, think, perceive, or feel in concrete cases ultimately depends on the entire system of our thoughts.²⁵

But this raises the following problem: How can this kind of holism be reconciled with the realistic demand of Spinoza's rationalism? Can an approach whose intent is realistic also commit itself to a semantics in which the contents of our thoughts are determined by the mutual relations among these thoughts?

At this point, it is crucial to differentiate between two potential objections. By raising the prospect of a semantic holism, 2p11c poses no *direct* challenge to the basic realist convictions of the *Ethics*. As explained above, Spinoza's realism makes no descriptive statements about the process of cognition. It does not claim that our perceptions relate to extramental objects either directly or by means of representations; rather, it is the ontological expectation that all being can in principle be known in its entirety. This conviction is not refuted by pointing out that mental content is holistically determined. It might call into doubt whether the content of a specific view on being corresponds with reality, but it cannot serve to disprove the claim that being is fully intelligible. On a fundamental level, then, the semantic holism mentioned above is indeed compatible with Spinoza's rationalism.²⁶

25. In this context, Della Rocca 1996b, 44–5, refers to a "mind-relativity of content." He considers this to be an expression of semantic holism, comparable to Quine's indeterminacy thesis (Della Rocca 1996b, 68–9). However, Della Rocca fails to recognize the empiricist implications of this holism. This is because he follows Wilson in assuming that the human mind is a *divine*, rather than a *human*, knowledge (Della Rocca 1996b, 8 and 54). Brandom 1976, 147 and 159, goes even further than Della Rocca in one of his earliest essays, also mentioning a "mind-relativity of content," but he ultimately interprets this as a "context-relativity of content."

26. This agrees with the conclusion that Esfeld draws in his study of holism in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of physics: "Holism in the philosophy of mind is congruent with a worldview that relies on scientific realism" (2002, 13). The implicit epistemology of the TTP shows that Spinoza would likely endorse this view. In contrast to Ludwig Meyer's *Philosophia Sacra Scriptura Interpres*, Spinoza maintains that the meaning of Scripture does not coincide

Objections of another kind are much more serious. Instead of charging Spinoza's basic realist convictions with implausibility, they launch an *indirect* attack against his realism by pointing to a ruinous implication of his holism for the feasibility of certain distinctions. What if, they ask, Spinoza were confronted with the following questions? If there are insights that fit the facts more closely and insights that fit the facts less closely, how are we to distinguish between them while also embracing a semantic holism? And if we have two alternative possibilities for understanding something, how are we to find out which one of the two is the more correct? For instance, if someone I do not know bumps into me on the train, how can I decide whether this action was intentional or an accident? In terms of a holistic approach, both alternatives seem to be equally possible—yet, if the basic realist convictions of the *Ethics* are sound, only one of them can be correct.

How would Spinoza react to these kinds of objections? First, we should point out that his reconstructive approach would compel him to describe the epistemological scenario in terms other than my own example of the stranger on the train would suggest. For Spinoza, the question that needs answering is not: does this or that idea which we are able to form about a certain thing or event come closer to the real state of affair? It is: how can we know whether some already formed conception of our current situation is adequate? The scenario that he envisions, then, is more comparable to a situation in which we take an allegation we have already made—for instance, that the stranger bumped into us on purpose—and subject its adequacy to further scrutiny.

The question remains: how can human beings know whether their ideas are adequate? Prior to the *Ethics*, Spinoza discussed this question in the TdIE, in connection with the problem of the method of philosophy.²⁷ In the *Ethics*, however, this question is addressed relatively late, namely in 2p43, which states that the person who has a true idea also knows that she has a true idea.²⁸ As the

with its truth (see Walther 1991). This is why exegesis cannot simply consist in determining the truth of certain biblical statements. But this coexistence of truth and meaning does not imply that there are two different truths, for there is only one natural law, which only the *lumen naturale* can illuminate—and this natural light is common to all. Thus, the epistemology of the TTP already assumes that scientific realism and semantic holism are compatible.

27. See TdIE § 36. Here, Spinoza comments on his view that the philosophical method simply consists in reflecting on ideas we already have. He supports this view by saying that a true insight does not require a criterion other than itself: "Since truth, therefore, requires no sign, but it suffices, in order to remove all doubt, to have the objective essence of things, or, what is the same, ideas" (C I, 18; G II, 15).

28. C I, 479; G II, 123: "He who has a true idea at the same time knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing."

scholium to 2p43 makes clear, this leads to the claim that we do not need a criterion of truth to determine that an insight is true; Spinoza writes, the “truth [of an idea] is the standard both of itself and of the false.”²⁹ He apparently assumes that when we have a true idea, we are also aware of having a true idea, and we are aware of it necessarily and independently from any criterion of truth.

For a better understanding of this point, we must study the final part of 2p11c, which Spinoza uses later to support the proof to 2p43. Once again, this final part posits an equivalence between two statements. The first statement is, “God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind.” This is supposed to be equivalent to saying that “the human mind perceives the thing only partially, *or* inadequately.” What exactly does this mean? When are ideas adequate, and when are they inadequate?

Scholars often try to answer this question by proposing a causal interpretation of Spinoza’s concept of adequacy. According to this interpretation, ideas are adequate if the human mind is their only cause.³⁰ This is completely correct and borne out by the text,³¹ but it obscures the vital point for the question is what it means when Spinoza says that the mind is either the complete cause or merely a partial cause of an idea—and thus, what it means when ideas are evaluated with regard to their adequacy. If we consider Spinoza’s cognitivist approach, which was the topic of the previous section, and combine it with our semantic reading of 2p11c, it should be clear that adequacy is not a question of how ideas are psychologically produced. The question is, rather, to which semantic relations a certain idea owes its content. More precisely, we need to ask what semantic relation prevails between a given idea and the idea that constitutes the human mind and how it relates to those ideas which are contained in the idea that constitutes the mind.

The issue of whether an idea is completely or only partially caused by the human mind, then, is not a matter of psychological causality—it is a matter of spelling out relations of implication between the idea that constitutes an individual mind and those ideas that correspond to its perceptions. Accordingly, we can define Spinoza’s concept of inadequate perception as follows. If the mind has “only” an inadequate or partial perception of something, it means that the knowledge that constitutes this mind implies no complete knowledge of the perceived

29. C 479; G II, 124.

30. Notable proponents of this interpretation are Bennett 1984, 177; Bittner 1994, 970–1; Della Rocca 1996b, 54–5; and Amann 2000, 232. For Radner 1971, 356–7, on the other hand, adequate ideas and the mind’s adequate causation of ideas are not the same.

31. Spinoza himself offers such an interpretation in 3p1.

object. Or, in other words, inadequate ideas cannot be described as implications of the idea that constitutes the human mind. Conversely, we can say that ideas are adequate if and only if they can be explicated by appealing only to the idea that constitutes the human mind—or to an idea contained therein. Finally, if there is no relation at all between an idea and our mind, then we do not have that idea—this much is trivial.

How can this reading support the claim, made in 2p43, that whenever we have a true idea we also know that we have a true idea? At this point, one must recall what Spinoza says about the relationship between the truth of ideas and their adequacy. As suggested by 2def4, Spinoza assumes that true ideas have an additional quality, which applies to all true ideas (and only to true ideas) and which cannot be reduced to their truth. This is yet another pivotal place where the *Ethics* operates with a form of aspect dualism: adequacy and truth are two different yet coextensive properties of certain ideas—which is why the questions of what truth is and how it can be known to us can be handled separately.³² No justification is given for this kind of aspect dualism; it is simply taken for granted by 1ax6 and 2def4. It is clear, however, that it is precisely this aspect dualism that enables Spinoza to advocate both a correspondence theory of truth and a coherence theory of knowledge. Likewise, it is this very same aspect dualism that makes Spinoza's realist rationalism compatible with his semantic holism.³³

We are now in the position to get a first grasp on the purpose behind the last part of 2p11c and to see how its description of inadequate perception supports the claim of 2p43s—that when we have a true idea, we know we have a true idea. What exactly does it mean for a true idea to be adequate? 2def4 gives only a preliminary response. The definition determines that ideas should be called adequate based on intrinsic denominations, which means that their adequacy has nothing to do with what makes an idea true, according to 1ax6: namely, its agreement with an object. But what these intrinsic denominations actually are is left unspecified

32. For the conceptual motif of aspect dualism, see Part II, Chapter 5, § b.

33. Without this truth-theoretical aspect dualism—which, incidentally, also informs the implicit epistemology of the TTP—Spinoza's approach would not be as subtle as it is. It is also a distinguishing feature of his mature philosophy. While the TdIE and the CM anticipate Spinoza's mature position, it is not yet fully developed in either. For instance, the TdIE states that the difference between true and false thoughts merely consists in an intrinsic determination (see § 69; C I, 30–1; G II, 26), and the CM maintains that truth and falsehood are extrinsic determinations of something (see I, Chapter 6; C I, 143–4; G I, 105–6). The apparent contradiction between these two passages can be resolved by looking at Spinoza's later position: truth and falsehood—or adequacy and inadequacy—are *intrinsic* determinations of *ideas* but *extrinsic* determinations of *things*.

by 2def4.³⁴ The final part of 2p11c fills this gap, albeit in a surprising fashion. According to this passage, the intrinsic feature that makes an idea adequate is not simply a property of a true idea considered in isolation but its *inferential relation to the knowledge that constitutes the mind*. Thus, when Spinoza talks about an intrinsic feature of true ideas, he envisions more than just a psychological quality, for instance, the certainty we may feel upon having a true idea. What he really has in mind are the semantic relations that determine the content of true ideas and that make it possible for us to know their objects. Yet this intrinsic feature can replace any additional criterion of truth because the semantic relations which characterize a true idea also produce a feeling of certainty, which we may recognize, provided it is not obscured by false theories.³⁵ Thus, the feeling of certainty is a psychological epiphenomenon, as it were, of the inferential relations constituting the adequacy of our ideas.

We can therefore conclude that 2p11c contains crucial decisions for Spinoza's entire psychology and epistemology—even though these decisions may be different from what one might expect after a first reading of the corollary. Spinoza does not simply delegate our being a subject to God. Instead, he makes it clear that what we think depends on the entire network of our thoughts. Also, he discusses how ideas that we actually have can be adequate. These two specifications both correct and confirm our everyday psychological and epistemological convictions. On the one hand, they undermine our spontaneous confidence that our perceptions are right. If what we perceive depends upon the entire system of our thoughts, and if this system is furthermore subject to external influences that we cannot control—influences that we are often not even aware of—then it is impossible that we have the content of our thoughts freely at our disposal. And, in fact, it is naive to think that things are exactly as they present themselves before our eyes. On the other hand, Spinoza also defends himself against skeptical objections that could be made on the basis of this insight,³⁶ for if we are mistaken about something, we may not notice it at once—but we can nonetheless assume that the truth of ideas is accessible to us qua adequacy and that we will realize it sooner or later when we have a true idea. Thus, the fact that we have a true idea is expressed by our certainty. Yet, this certainty consists not in an isolated impression of evidence but rather in a consistency which stands the test of time.

34. See Gueroult 1968, 452.

35. See Matheron's reconstruction of the argument made in 2p43s (1994, 89).

36. For the problem of skepticism, see also Perler 2007.

c) *The Functioning of the Mind: The Epistemic Prerequisite of the Awareness of Affections*

According to our reconstructions of 2p11 and 2p11c, Spinoza thinks that our mind consists in an idea, or a cognition, and that the content of our perceptions is determined through the systematic order of our thoughts. But one question remains open: in this kind of approach, how is it conceivable that we have perceptions in the first place—or, in other words, what exactly does it mean that our mind *has* ideas? How, or by means of which conceptual tools, can the *Ethics* analyze cognitive processes?

Spinoza first addresses this problem in 2p12, albeit on a very basic level. He writes,

Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind must be perceived by the human mind, *or* there will necessarily be an idea of that thing in the mind; that is, if the object of the idea constituting a human mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body which is not perceived by the mind.³⁷

This proposition contains two formal peculiarities:

1. It is composed of two parts whose functions are markedly different. The first part makes an assertion, the meaning of which is then illustrated by the second part, which operates with the example of a body.
2. The first part purports to be highly general—and this is multiply emphasized. It refers to everything, *quicquid*, that occurs in the object of the mind; it maintains that the mind *necessarily* has an idea of those occurrences; it says that the mind *must* have these ideas (*debet*) or that these ideas *will* be in the mind (*dabitur*).

To gain a precise understanding of 2p12, we need to keep these two characteristics in mind. If we do not, we will run into significant difficulties for, despite the evidence provided by the second part, it is not clear at all what we are to make of the connection between the corporeal events and their perception by the mind. In and by itself, the claim that there exists such a connection is not very problematic. We should be sufficiently familiar with phenomena which testify to such a connection. Who does not know the condition of steadily increasing nausea,

37. C I, 456–7; G II, 95.

which suddenly dominates all our thoughts? And conversely, who has never had their appetite ruined by a piece of bad news?

But if we assume that the perception of corporeal events is the primary topic of 2p12, we have to deal with rather disconcerting consequences. Considering the general formulation of the first part, we would have to assume that *each and every process* that occurs in our body can be perceived by us, without any limitation.³⁸ But that is surely counterintuitive, even if we assume that some of the processes in question may be unconscious or that Spinoza talks about a psychosomatic connection between corporeal processes and our mental condition—and not about the conscious knowledge of physical events.³⁹ Nobody will claim they can feel it when a single cell in their stomach wall has died—not even if the perception is supposed to be unconscious or, as Spinoza would put it, confused. Neither can this kind of event be said to have any psychosomatic significance. It is therefore no accident that Spinoza's view of this issue has frequently been criticized by all those who interpret 2p12 with an emphasis on the second part.⁴⁰

The only way to avoid these difficulties is by strictly differentiating between the actual claim of the first part and its illustration in the second. What the first part of 2p12 addresses is not the relationship between corporeal events and their perception but the relationship between the object of the idea that constitutes our mind and certain ideas that are in the mind. The second part merely illustrates, by means of an example, what Spinoza has in view here: let us assume that the human mind is the idea of the body—which claim is demonstrated in 2p13 but not before—then the mind will have a perception of everything that happens in that body. For the interpretation of 2p12, this means that we must refrain from reading the proposition as if it *affirmed* our ability to perceive all corporeal events. We can still assume that the proposition seeks to explain this kind of perception.⁴¹ But what 2p12 maintains, in categorical form, is not that we must

38. Della Rocca refers to this as the “pancreas problem” (2008, 108–18). Following the reading I am suggesting here, this problem does not exist for Spinoza but only for those of his interpreters who do not read 2p12 carefully.

39. See Parkinson 1954, 110–11, who thinks that this is an anticipation of Leibniz's distinction between perception and apperception. For a meta-critique of Parkinson's view, see Odegard 1975, 71–2. Wiehl 1996, 292, in particular, emphasizes the psychosomatic unity of the human being.

40. See Bennett 1984, 14 and 155; Della Rocca 1996b, 9 and 24; and Wilson 1999, 137–8.

41. If we look at later uses of this proposition, we realize that 2p12 never does this alone but always in conjunction with statements about the physical constitution of the human body. Spinoza comes back to this proposition in two ways. First, combined with statements from the physical digression, 2p12 serves to explain certain perceptual dispositions of the human body (see 2p17, 2p17c, and 2p19). Second, 2p12 helps Spinoza to determine, from an epistemological

be able to perceive corporal events—all it says is that we must be able to perceive events occurring within the object of the idea constituting our mind. Thus, there is no assumption to the effect that we must be able to perceive any and all physiological processes that occur within the confines of the human body; the proposition merely states that we must be able to have an idea of events *precisely insofar as they occur in the object of our mind*.⁴²

This reading changes the meaning of 2p12 significantly, compared to what one is initially inclined to gather from this theorem. The proposition is not directly concerned with the psychosomatic connection of body and mind; instead, it delineates the scope of things we can perceive with certainty. Spinoza tells us that the scope of the things we perceive depends on the object of our mind. Thus, the decisive factor for perceiving an event is not that it occurs in our body but that it stands in a certain relation to the knowledge that constitutes the human mind. Physiological processes *may* have this kind of rapport with the mind, but they certainly do not have to.

It is not the case, then, that 2p12 asserts that all corporeal events can universally be perceived; on the contrary, the proposition makes it clear that our perception of these things depends on very specific conditions: they are perceptible only if the body in which they occur is indeed the object of the mind. And they are perceptible precisely insofar as this is the case. The implications can best be illustrated by a simple example. Let us assume that the object of the idea constituting our mind is the body as we feel it proprioceptively. Doubtless, the stomach will be part of this object in some situations—but surely not every single cell (as a single cell) in the stomach wall. Consequently, we will have no perception of a single cell dying, but we will certainly notice it if some food does not agree with us. Whether, and to what extent, we perceive physiological events is thus determined by the way in which our body is actually the object of our mind, to what extent it is this object, and how it is phenomenologically experienced as such.

This has serious consequences for the way in which perception is conceived. For one thing, it underlines something that already emerged in 2p11 and 2p11c, namely that our perceptions are not simply a matter of psychological and psychophysical abilities. Apparently, even my perception of physical affections depends on some preexisting knowledge (i.e., knowledge that I have in my capacity as a mind). Earlier, we discussed Spinoza's tendency to semanticize the psychological;

point of view, what a human being can and cannot know (see 2p38 and 5p4). Only in this latter instance can Spinoza do without referring to any additional physical knowledge.

42. See my remarks in Renz 2013a. As I point out there, it is crucial to note that Spinoza develops this thesis *prior to* 2p13. Otherwise, he could not account for the problem of psychosomatic perception as he does in 2p12.

now, we see that even bodily sensations such as pain are affected by this tendency. On the other hand, we can now discern the function of the knowledge that makes up the mind, according to 2p11: it enables us to realize that the object of the mind is actually affected by some concrete event. This is based on the assumption, however, that it is one and the same epistemic subject that has both the idea representing the event and the idea constituting the mind. Considering Spinoza's line of argument in 2p12dem, it is clear that this subject can only be a human being and certainly not God. This is because the proof is largely based on 2p9c—the exact corollary that establishes that events are knowable only if the event's location is epistemically accessible by the local knowledge of a finite and locally situated epistemic subject.⁴³

At this point, we receive definitive confirmation of something that has been stated many times in the course of our reconstruction: in the *Ethics*, Spinoza does not operate with the concept of a divine subject; rather, he conceives of subjectivity as something that only finite things can have. This makes perfect sense if we consider what we have just said about Spinoza's conception of perception. It would matter only to a finite thing whether it is affected by an event or whether it remains unaffected by it; which is why the insight of being affected by an event—be it directly or merely indirectly—constitutes relevant knowledge only for a finite subject.

We can conclude our reading of 2p12 by saying that the idea that constitutes the human mind (according to 2p11) fulfills a very specific function: it represents a necessary epistemic precondition for making perception possible. The next section deals with the precise object of this idea, and it will demonstrate the following: as far as its structure is concerned, the knowledge that makes up the mind is a kind of self-knowledge, which is what makes it possible that a physical being is epistemically accessible to itself. While Spinoza generally favors a deflationary approach, his concept of mind indirectly implies that there is a prerequisite for having a mind, and thus for being a subject of mental states and activities; this prerequisite is for a being to have at least a rudimentary epistemic access to itself.

We should note a final detail here. As our analysis has shown, Spinoza emphasizes that there is a strictly necessary connection between the knowledge that makes up the mind and the mind's perception of everything that affects its object. This is eminently important for the explainability of experience. 2p12 makes the following crucial point: if an event affects the object of the knowledge that makes up a mind, then this mind will necessarily perceive the event, whether

43. See Chapter 9, § b, of the current part.

it chooses to or not. This means that foreign experience, too, will be epistemically accessible—as will even highly unusual experiences, within certain limits. This is because we will have sufficient knowledge of the experience of other beings to tell *whether* they will consider certain affections to be *meaningful for them*. Even though it may seem impossible to know *what it is like* to be a bat, a terrified animal before the slaughter, a philosopher fleeing from religious zealots, a lottery winner, or the mother of someone who died a premature death—their emotions nonetheless fall within the scope of that which can in principle be explained.

d) The Non-Transferability of the Mind: The Distinctive Objective Reality of Our Self-Knowledge

As we have seen, Spinoza considers the human mind to be an idea or a kind of knowledge of a very specific object. This view is not without problems. For instance, knowledge is normally transferable. Whatever I know, I can communicate to another person, and if there are no intellectual or conceptual barriers preventing him from acquiring that knowledge, he will become privy to it. But to assume that one's own mind can be transferred in such a manner leads to rather questionable consequences, for this would mean that I am capable of imposing the knowledge that constitutes my mind on everyone so that all of humankind would end up being of a single, numerically identical mind—my mind. This would be an enticing idea for any absolutist monarch. What stands in its way, however, is the conviction that subjects are numerically different and irreducibly so. As stated above, this conviction is crucial for Spinoza's practical philosophy, and our analysis of 2p11 has shown that he is keen to hold on to it.⁴⁴ Thus, Spinoza must either be able to show that the knowledge that makes up my mind cannot be transferred to other individuals in the same way as, say, the fact that Spinoza died on February 21, 1677, in The Hague can be transferred. Or he has to acknowledge that significant disagreements persist between his practical and his theoretical philosophy.

In my view, it is this problem to which Spinoza reacts when he says, in 2p13, that “[t]he object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, *or* a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else.”⁴⁵ By emphasizing this context as providing the crucial motivation for Spinoza's conception of the human mind, I differ from the vast majority of commentators. For me, 2p13 is not intended to clarify the ontological relationship between the body and the

44. See also Chapter 8 of this part.

45. C I, 457; G II, 96.

mind—this problem has already been resolved in 2p7s, and 2p13 can at most be seen as further confirmation. In fact, the proposition is meant to establish the epistemic foundation for self-ascribing affections. I call this an epistemic foundation because the purpose behind 2p13 is merely to show why we necessarily *perceive* ourselves as numerically different subjects. Only in connection with the physics will we be able to tell to what extent we actually *are* different, physically separated individuals.⁴⁶ From a historical point of view, this reading makes perfect sense.⁴⁷ But its accuracy is also confirmed by Spinoza's future references to 2p13: in more than half of these references, Spinoza seeks to explain what the human mind *knows*, in its capacity as the idea of the body. The question is not what the human mind *is*.⁴⁸

On the following pages, I take some time to flesh out this interpretation of 2p13. In particular, I address a few technical questions that have gained some notoriety among readers of the *Ethics*. Judging purely from its phrasing, 2p13 seems to be rather vague in several regards. For instance, what exactly is this body that 2p13 is talking about? Since there are no articles in Latin and the lack of personal pronouns and grammatical modifiers makes it impossible to say what kind of body we are dealing with, the text seems to be ambiguous in this regard. Is the object in question simply an arbitrary body which just happens to be the object of my ideas, such as the writing desk in front of me? Or is it our very own physical body? This problem can be solved, however, despite frequent

46. See also Part I, Chapter 3, § c.

47. 2p13—including the consequence, stressed in 2p13s, that the human mind and body form a unity—can be seen in conjunction with the Averroism controversy. In this controversy, the unity of body and mind—or, more precisely, of body and intellect—was a very important topic. This can be seen from Question 76 of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, entitled "The Union of Body and Soul." Here, Aquinas defends the view that understanding is an action of individual persons. This question also shows that the Averroism debate, in Christian philosophy, is not—as Nadler 2001, 66, seems to suggest—limited to the problem of personal immortality. It is doubtful whether Spinoza knew Thomas. But he was certainly familiar with the problem itself, from Jewish philosophy as well as from Spanish and Dutch late scholasticism, which adopts Thomas' arguments. See, e.g., Suárez *De anima*, (1978/1981/1991, Disp. 2, q. 4, § 2, § 12, and § 14). Adrian Heereboord refers to this problem in his *Philosophia Naturalis* (1665b, 241–2). See also my exposition in Renz 2013b.

48. Aside from 2p13c and 2p13s, there are twelve references to 2p13 in total in the *Ethics*. In seven of these cases, the human mind is clearly referred to as an epistemic subject: namely, in 2p19, 2p23, 2p24, 2p26, 2p29, 2p38, 2p39, as well as the appendix to Part Three, where Spinoza explains the general definition of affect. The mind–body relation is featured only in 2p21 and 2p21s. 2p15, 5p23, and 5p29 can be linked to both readings. It is also notable that 3p2s, which contains probably the most comprehensive account of the ontological identity of body and mind, refers only to 2p7s.

misunderstandings.⁴⁹ For one thing, 2p13dem refers back to 2ax4, which talks about a “certain” body (*corpus quoddam*). This does not yet identify the body in question, but it effectively rules out the possibility that we are dealing with an arbitrary body. Furthermore, it follows from later references (e.g., 2p19dem) that the subject matter of 2p13 is indeed the *human* body. What the proposition is concerned with, then, is not a body that just happens to be the object of our ideas but the very body that corresponds to the human mind. There are reasons why 2p13 does not identify this body unequivocally, and these reasons will be the subject of later discussions.

But first, we need to address an additional problem: if 2p13 really deals with the *human* body, what is so special about this body that it alone qualifies to be the object of the mind? Is Spinoza focusing on specific physiological features here—for instance, the fact that the human body has a central nervous system?⁵⁰

Indeed, Spinoza maintains that the aptitude of our mind to perceive many things at once has something to do with the constitution of the human body.⁵¹ He does so in connection with the physical digression, which he places between 2p13 and 2p14. For instance, the human body is constituted in such a way that it is composed of fluid, soft, and hard parts.⁵² This makes it possible for external bodies to affect the fluid parts of the human body, which then communicate the impression to the soft parts; over time, persistent traces of individual events will remain established in the body.⁵³ This, in turn, is a physiological precondition for the human ability to retain⁵⁴ and

49. See also Hallett 1972, who reacts mostly to the criticism which Pollock 1880, 146, and Barker 1972, have leveled against Spinoza's concept of idea. Both have the same complaint as Radner 1971, namely that Spinoza's ideas can represent the body as well as external objects.

50. Cf. Odegard 1975, 77, who goes in the exact opposite direction when he answers the question of what kind of body the object of the mind is.

51. See 2p14: “The human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable, the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways” (C I, 462; G II, 103).

52. See 2p13 post 2: “Some of the individuals of which the human body is composed are fluid, some soft, and others, finally, are hard” (C I, 462; G II, 102).

53. See 2p13 post 5: “When a fluid part of the human body is determined by an external body so that it frequently thrusts against a soft part [of the body], it changes its surface and, as it were, impresses on [the soft part] certain traces of the external body striking against [the fluid part]” (C I, 462; G II, 102d).

54. See 2p17: “If the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human mind will regard the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the body is affected by an affect that excludes the existence or presence of that body” (C I, 463–4; G II, 104).

associate⁵⁵ ideas. Apparently, Spinoza thinks that the specific constitution of the human body plays a crucial role in determining which cognitive feats the human mind is able to perform.

In 2p13, however, Spinoza is not yet concerned with the cognitive performance of the human mind. At this point, he has not even pinpointed the specifics of the human body. We need to keep this in mind if we want to determine what makes the human body so special that it is qualified to be the preferred object of the mind, according to 2p13. And if we do keep this in mind, we should refrain from taking later references to this proposition as evidence that Spinoza deals with the biological constitution of the human body in 2p13. Whenever these later references use the term *corpus humanum*, we should rather take it as a neutral equivalent to the indexical expression “our body.” This also sheds some new light on Spinoza’s use of the phrase *mens humana*—analogously, we can assume that the adjective “human” is sometimes meant to replace the indexical possessive pronoun “our.”

Thus, the question of what makes the human body so special—special enough to be the object of the mind—can be resolved as soon as we realize that Spinoza’s focus is not on the human body but rather on *our* body. An important piece of evidence comes from the proof of 2p13. Formally speaking, this proof is a *reductio ad absurdum*,⁵⁶ whose main point can be illustrated by the following thought experiment. Let us assume that our mind consists of an idea of a random singular thing—which would be possible, according to the preliminary definition of 2p11. Assume, for instance, that my mind is the idea of the mail carrier who just rang my doorbell. Conversely, the mind of the mail carrier would consist in the idea of my body sitting at a writing desk. What would this mean for the ideas that we have? It would mean that the mail carrier would have to perceive the affections that my body suffers when rushing to the door and hitting my knee on the edge of the table, whereas I myself would remain completely unaware of it.

A scenario like this is clearly absurd, seeing that it contradicts the basic intuitions underlying our everyday ascriptions of experience. In his argument for 2p13dem, Spinoza invokes precisely one of these intuitions when he refers to 2ax4 (“We feel that a certain body is affected in many ways”).⁵⁷ (This, by the way, is the only reference to 2ax4 in the entire *Ethics*.) This axiom simply expresses the

55. See 2p18: “If the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also” (C I, 465; G II, 106).

56. For a formal analysis, see also Levy 2000, 97 and 100.

57. Here, the Latin has an accusative and infinitive that is difficult to translate: *Nos corpus quoddam multis modis affici sentimus*.

phenomenological fact that, if something significant happens to our body, we notice it. At the very least, the opposite—that we would have no idea of anything that really affects us—would be quite contrary to our everyday experience. Referring back to 2ax4, 2p13 presumes that we know when our body is affected by something.

But what kind of knowledge is this? The text only tells us that this knowledge is active whenever we ascribe bodily affections to ourselves. Apparently, this knowledge enables us to intuitively perceive a certain body as *our own body*. This would make it a kind of rudimentary, body-focused self-awareness. This knowledge does not have to be explicated. Judging from the terminology and grammatical structure of 2ax4, Spinoza was likely thinking of a kind of tacit knowledge, which, as a rule, is not available in the form of propositions. This makes perfect sense, seeing that we take it for granted that even simple organisms are capable of relating affections to themselves.

We could therefore say that the knowledge described in 2ax4 is not so much an explicit knowledge of the human body but rather an implicit acquaintance with my body as my own.⁵⁸ If we interpret it in this way, the reference to 2ax4 solves the problem raised by the thought experiment mentioned above. It is this implicit intimacy we have to our own body that makes it impossible for the knowledge constituting a mind to be transferred. Although other people may have a more complete view and perception of my body than I do (for instance, by seeing me from the back) and a better understanding of its mode of operation (if they are trained physicians), nobody else will ever know this body as his or her own. We can therefore say with confidence that Spinoza's concept of the human mind—even though the mind is supposed to be made up of knowledge alone—nonetheless assumes that human subjectivity cannot be transferred (which also means, incidentally, that subjects are numerically different).

Yet, although the knowledge constituting the mind cannot be transferred, it can still be corrected.⁵⁹ We see evidence for this in Spinoza's claim that—per several propositions in Part Five—the mind can become eternal through a change in its knowledge—knowledge, that is, of the human body, which means one's own body. This is perfectly plausible, considering all those familiar cases where

58. When 2ax4 refers to knowledge of one's own body, this knowledge is not identical with the knowledge Spinoza later describes under the heading "idea of the idea" (*idea ideae*). As I will show below, knowledge of one's own body is a necessary requirement for having an idea of the idea of the body, but it does not coincide with it (see Part IV, Chapter 14, § b). This is why I do not share Levy's view that, in 2p13, Spinoza already operates on the level of the *idea ideae* (2000, 96).

59. Levy 2000, 96, calls the consciousness of our feelings "incorrigible," which is a vague reference to the contemporary debate about the phenomenon of first-person authority.

someone's implicit understanding of his or her own body changes radically. Examples include those who "unlearn" their phantom limb pain⁶⁰ and blind people incorporating their white canes into their proprioception.⁶¹ In both these cases, the implicit knowledge of one's own body—in terms of its boundaries as well as its composition—has substantially changed. And, if we may say so in passing, it also differs significantly from the body image of an average adult.

Now, such changes in our knowledge of our own body are only intelligible if we distinguish clearly between two sorts of problems. It is one thing to ask *if* someone can identify his or her own body and another thing altogether to ask *how* and *in what form* it is perceived by him or her. On Spinoza's approach, the answer to the first question is an unqualified yes, as long as the being in question is endowed with a mind. The second question, on the other hand, will require an answer that is more complex and dependent upon empirical and historical facts. Apparently, the *reductio ad absurdum* of 2p13d only answers the first question. It is not until we get to the theory of the imagination and the doctrine of the affects that we receive some information about the things we perceive when we feel our body and what this perception depends upon. This sheds some light on a further point. We have already seen that, in 2p13 and 2ax4, Spinoza never talks about "our body" but only about "the body" or "a certain body." Why does he do this if his aim is clearly to show that knowing one's own body as one's own is precisely the kind of knowledge that constitutes the human mind? And all the apparent difficulties resulting from the lack of articles in Latin—could they not be avoided by using the phrase *corpus noster* in 2p13, instead of the simple term *corpus*? Or by using the phrase *corpus humanus*, the expression Spinoza prefers in later passages?

The text in this passage is so carefully composed that there must be good reasons for this vagueness. We can tentatively identify these reasons by pointing out that there is a system behind Spinoza's various descriptions of one's own body. It is notable that this vagueness stops exactly at 2p13c. This corollary marks the first instance in which the *Ethics* talks about the "human body." In later passages, then—starting with 2p13s, to be precise—Spinoza does not hesitate to use the phrase "our body." It seems as if this clarification is itself a result of 2p13. This suggests that this proposition fulfills an additional function. It does not only determine *which thing* is the object of the idea constituting our mind; it also stipulates—albeit indirectly—that *our body* is identical with the objective content of this idea. The concept of one's own body, then—the one we have at our disposal—also depends upon that with which we identify ourselves. Imagine an

60. Ramachandran and Blakeslee 2002 demonstrate that this is indeed possible.

61. See also Polanyi 1985, 21, and 1958, 58–9.

infant who cannot go for a single minute without his stuffed animal. What this infant will perceive as “his own body” may be markedly different from an adult’s perception of his own body.

This assumption—that 2p13 tacitly introduces a certain concept of the human body—can be substantiated by looking at additional passages. For one thing, it corresponds to the treatment of 2p12 above: namely, that the body constituting the object of the mind is not the body in itself but the body as perceived as having a certain extension and a certain phenomenological density. Also, 2p13c can easily be deciphered from this point of view. We can assume that this corollary is meant to clarify those implications of 2p13 that Spinoza addresses neither in the proposition itself nor in its demonstration. Two things stand out here: while the first part of 2p13c explains the ontological constitution of the human being,⁶² the second part seems intent on elucidating the stipulative character of 2p13, by stating that “the human body exists, as we are aware of it.”⁶³ According to these lines, our body is exactly what we perceive, and it stops existing as our body as soon as we cease to have any kind of perception.

In summary, we can say that, by identifying the human mind with the idea of the body, Spinoza achieves far more than one would expect from simply looking at 2p13 as a statement about the ontological relationship between body and mind. Doubtless, there are some indications of how we are supposed to think of this relationship.⁶⁴ But if we decide to follow the argument of 2p13dem, the emphasis of 2p13 is not on the mind–body problem at all but rather on a twofold question: what is it that determines the numerical difference between discrete minds, and what is it that defines the individuality of a mind? Spinoza answers these questions by pointing out that each mind has its own *realitas objectiva*, which is mutable but not transferable; and since it is not transferable, it is also unmistakably one’s own.

62. “From this it follows that man consists of a mind and a body” (C I, 457; G II, 96).

63. C I, 457; G II, 96.

64. This interpretation of 2p13 is favored by Curley 1988, 72–3; Levy 2000, 86–7; and Jaquet 2004, 7–8, among others. They partly rely on the expression “union of mind and body,” as it appears in the first sentence of 2p13s. The authors consider this expression to be a reference to Descartes’ third fundamental concept, the “substantial union.” Nevertheless, for the historical context of the term “union” (of body and mind), see footnote 47 of this present chapter.

Panpsychism, or the Question “What Is the Subject of Experience?”

IN OUR EVERYDAY usage, experience is something we attribute only to certain types of things. Most commonly, humans are said to have experiences, although animals are sometimes included in this group as well. We are much more reluctant to say the same about plants, and nobody would attribute experience to a table or a stone. Similar restrictions apply when we consider collective experiences. Experience is something human populations can acquire, or it can be ascribed to the history of humankind as a whole. On the other hand, we would not use the term with regard to socially complex animal populations, such as bee colonies and herds of wildebeests. Apparently, we limit the term “experience” to things we assume to have a mind similar to our own, or—in the case of collectives—to entities we believe are endowed with a sense of history. It almost seems, therefore, as if experience would be inconceivable without a certain minimum of anthropomorphism.

What does the *Ethics* have to say in this regard? Which things does it consider capable of having experiences? And which thoughts in this direction are relevant for Spinoza’s so-called panpsychism?

To tackle these questions, it is important to distinguish between two possible boundaries, one from above and one from below. It is relatively easy to define the upper limit of the class of objects capable of having experiences. According to 2p9c and 2p12, only *finite* things can be affected by events in a significant way, which suggests that Spinoza considers finite things to be the only ones capable of having experiences. This makes it impossible for God or an infinite being to qualify as a subject of experience.

It is more difficult to set a boundary from below. We have already seen that the conceptual foundation of the *Ethics* knows but a single sharp categorical break: that between the substance and the modes or between independent and

dependent beings.¹ This makes it quite difficult to distinguish clearly between different types of dependent things since, considered ontologically, all of them belong to the same category of being. To decide, therefore, which objects can have experiences, we cannot orient ourselves by looking for a categorical distinction or a specific ontological difference (at least as far as finite things are concerned). Instead, we must rely on differences that only exist in relation to specific viewpoints that exist in actual individuals.

This peculiarity of Spinoza's approach to the mind—which derives from his fundamental metaphysics—is also to be seen in the statement that all "individuals . . . though in different degrees" are considered to be animate.² At first glance, this doctrine of universal animation seems to make it impossible to distinguish between those beings that are subject to experience and those beings that are not. It seems as if Spinoza's approach really compels us to believe that all finite things—including humans, animals, stones, tables, corpses, and geometrical figures—can have and make experiences.

This interpretation is called into question by my analysis in the previous chapter. As my readings of 2p11 and 2p13 have shown, Spinoza's concept of mind is richer than the view that absolutely any idea of a thing can be considered a mind would suggest. Even though 2p11 describes the human mind as an idea, it is by no means an arbitrary idea but an idea that has three important characteristics: it relates to an *actually existing singular thing* (2p11); it not only *is* an idea but also *has* ideas, namely ideas of the affections applying to the object represented by the idea constituting the mind (2p12); and it constitutes a form of *self-knowledge*, namely the knowledge of one's own body (2p13). If we use these requirements as criteria for determining when an idea is a mind, we can exclude quite a few ideas from the privilege—or the burden—of being a mind. It would not only be general concepts, such as the concept of the human being, that would fall out of that category but also the ideas of simple things such as atoms.³ Not even ideas of stones, mountains, carcasses, or political states would qualify as minds, even though they can be very concrete and complex. They would not qualify because

1. It could be argued that this break is not so clear after all. Since the infinite modes are both dependent and infinite, isn't it conceivable that God, understood as an infinite intellect, is capable of having experience? But, as I have shown above, I do not regard the infinite modes as instantiated entities. In other words, the term "infinite mode" refers to nothing at all; it merely has an explanatory function. This settles the question of infinite modes having experience.

2. "For the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate" (C I, 458; G II, 96).

3. For the problem of atoms having a mind, also see Cristofolini 1992.

we would not normally say that they constitute a self-knowledge in the sense that the things they represent would have these ideas themselves.⁴

Apparently, Spinoza's application of the concept of mind is bound by more severe restrictions than one might think at first glance—that is, on the interpretation that the doctrine of universal animation is a statement about whether or not there is a mind in a given thing. It is one thing to assume that all things are animated and another thing altogether to maintain that all things have a mind. The way in which Spinoza uses the term *mens* in his own works is in keeping with this distinction. He himself mostly adheres to the above restrictions, and whenever he does not, he inserts a *quasi* or *veluti* to signal that “mind” is used only in a figurative sense.⁵ Thus, unlike the concept of animation, the concept of mind contains a genuinely anthropomorphic element: although all things are animated, only humans or beings similar to humans can have minds.⁶

Thus, the statement that “all things are animated because there exists an idea of them” does not mean that all things also have a mind. This raises the question why Spinoza even bothers with a doctrine of universal animation and why he introduces it right after his definition of the human mind. At first it seems as if this were merely a price Spinoza has to pay for his rationalism.⁷ For instance, he justifies this theory by saying that there is an idea of all things in God and that God is the origin of all these ideas, just as he is the origin of the idea of the human body.⁸ As we have stated on earlier occasions, when Spinoza says that there is an idea of a certain thing in God, what he really means is that this thing can be known. It is not surprising that this holds true for all individuals—which after all must not only be intelligible but also reconstructible in their constitution, according to Spinoza's concept of individual.⁹ By referring to their animation, Spinoza therefore asserts, as it were, that any singular thing must be knowable right down to its individual constitution.

Spinoza's theory of animation makes one claim, however, that cannot simply be explained by saying that Spinoza had to pay a price for his radical rationalism. As we have seen above, he asserts not simply that all things are animated but that

4. On corpses having a soul, see Gueroult 1974, 559–60. On states having a mind, see Matheron 2003.

5. For a more comprehensive discussion of this point, see Part I, Chapter 3, § c.

6. See Jaquet 2004, 140–1, as well as Cristofolini 1983.

7. For Bouveresse 1992, Spinoza's so-called panpsychism is an expression of his rationalism.

8. “For of each thing there is necessarily an idea in God, of which God is the cause in the same way as he is of the idea of the human body” (C I, 457; G II, 96).

9. See Part I, Chapter 3, § a.

they are animated to varying degrees. Spinoza apparently assumes that animation is a gradable property. This view is not covered by the assertion that there is an idea of everything in God. Why should the ideas of simple things express less animation than the ideas of complex things? The ideas of simple things are not any less in God than the ideas of complex things, nor are the simple things any less intelligible than the complex ones. On the contrary, simple things are easier to grasp in their entirety than complex ones. Yet, judging from how the scholium continues, it seems that Spinoza was quite preoccupied by this very aspect. His interest seems primarily directed toward the different degrees of animation, rather than toward its universality. What, then, is it about this claim that there are gradations of animation?

Throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza's project has been to show that experience is explainable. Let us recapitulate how close we are to this goal at this point. First, we identified the ontological conditions underlying a theory of the mind in which experience is explainable, and we discussed the corresponding assumptions regarding the ontology of the mental. On this level, the view that experience is explainable turned out to be a special case of Spinoza's more general claim that all being is completely intelligible. Second, it became clear in the course of our discussion of Spinoza's concept of mind that experience requires a being capable of ascribing events to the object of its mind—which is to say, to itself. What the *Ethics* has not yet addressed are *the circumstances* under which something produces this kind of self-reference. Spinoza's conception of the mind rules out that all things have minds. But we currently have no means to determine whether a mind or experience is present in individual cases.

I argue that Spinoza addresses this very problem when he talks about different degrees of animation. My basic assumption is that the alleged degree of animation corresponds to the extent to which an object can ascribe affections to itself. Thus, the intuition is that if we had a "measure," as it were, to judge an object's degree of animation, we could also make well-grounded claims about the circumstances and the extent to which this object has the ability to experience the events in which it is involved. But on what grounds could such judgments be made? Spinoza finds an indication in the physical capacity, or aptitude, of an individual to do and to suffer many things at the same time. This physical capacity correlates with the ability of the mind to perceive many things at once. Thus, the extent to which an object ascribes events to itself can in principle be gauged by looking at its physical constitution—which does not mean, however, that an object's animation could therefore be reduced to its physical constitution. Admittedly, this does not provide us with a proper criterion for determining whether or not a mind is present in any given case. But at least this helps us to explicate the "lower" threshold a little

more precisely: excluded from experiencing affections are, firstly, bodies whose complexity is so low that even a weak affection transforms them into something else—a triangle drawn on a blackboard stops being a triangle as soon as we run over it with a wet sponge—and, secondly, those bodies incapable of doing or suffering much whenever they are affected by something. Thus, Spinoza will ascribe experience to stones only in the context of a hypothetical thought experiment or not at all.¹⁰

When Spinoza says that individuals are animated to varying degrees, then, he makes a claim that is absolutely crucial for his argument that experience is explainable. This claim makes it possible to hypothesize systematically whether a being knows about the things that affect it—and, thus, whether and to what extent an individual is in fact a subject of experience. At this point, we can safely neglect the question of whether this is merely a heuristic model or whether Spinoza's claim involves genuine ontological concessions.¹¹ It is more important to emphasize that Spinoza does not simply intend to show how behavior can be predicted—which would be the case if his were a behaviorist approach. Rather, he wants to know what kinds of things have experiences—and, thus, a mind—and to what degree. Even though this seems to verge on physicalism, Spinoza takes this path not to skip over the individual subject but, on the contrary, to make the role it plays more palpable philosophically.

In fact, we often make similar assessments in borderline cases, which shows us just how plausible this procedure actually is. Imagine we had to decide whether lower animals, such as amoebas, have something akin to a mind. In a case like this, we would probably ask ourselves whether the process of absorbing foreign bodies is due to a pure reflex or whether it is based on something more complex, something that would hint at the existence of a sophisticated quasi-cognitive system for recognizing the difference between one's own body and foreign bodies. Only if this is the case would we be willing to attribute a mind and experience to the amoeba. Or let us ask ourselves how we are to gauge *the exact amount of actual experience* encountered by a possible subject of experience, considering that experiences may be very indirect. What, for example, does a human fetus experience in the womb when the pregnant mother is involved in an accident? To

10. In his first letter to Schuller, Spinoza talks about stones precisely in this hypothetical manner. He says that a stone would consider itself to be free if it could perceive how it passes on a movement it received from outside (Ep. 58; C II, 428; G IV, 266).

11. The reconstruction offered by Rice also proceeds from the view that the value of Spinoza's theorem of universal animation is mostly heuristic (1992, 219). Jonas (1965, 52) goes in a similar direction, crediting Spinoza with being the first modern thinker who develops a speculative means to relate the degree of a body's organization to a corresponding degree of consciousness.

answer questions such as these, we tend to follow trains of thought strikingly similar to Spinoza's claim that the body's ability to act and to suffer is indicative of an individual's degree of animation. We would ask ourselves, for instance, how developed the sense organs of the fetus are at this point, how developed the brain is, and so on. This will help us to determine what exactly the fetus will experience when it senses the commotion.

In conclusion, we can say that Spinoza's assumption of various degrees of animation plays a crucial role in his rationalist argumentation in favor of the notion that experience is explainable. This is why this assumption carries more authority, in my opinion, than the somewhat baroque thesis that absolutely each and every thing is animated. We could even say that Spinoza's so-called panpsychism is relativized by his claim that animation comes in different degrees, for this claim provides us with a heuristic instrument—through the back door, as it were—that enables us to decide (albeit provisionally) whether and to what extent something is a subject of experience. Relying on the claim that animation comes in various degrees, we can at least say that a number of things cannot possibly experience the events in which they are involved.

Thus, when it comes to the extension of subjectivity, Spinoza arrives at similar results as we would, based on the intuitions underlying our everyday linguistic habits. Yet, he by no means favors an intuitionist approach. On the contrary, it is crucial for his approach that he focuses on something that can be thought of in terms of physiological–physical knowledge. Granted, this inclusion of scientific, empirical knowledge does not falsify our intuitions regarding the presence of subjectivity. In fact, these intuitions are actually confirmed, in a very important sense. For the doctrine of gradual animation explicates, among other things, that experience is accessible only by beings that qualify as epistemic subjects—even though they may qualify as such only rudimentarily. But the criterion for ascribing subjectivity and experience is no longer provided by our intuitions but rather by the degree of animation that can be gauged by looking at the extent to which a body can be affected by something. This prevents us from drawing conclusions from our everyday intuitions that are based merely on anthropomorphic analogies.

Methodologically, Spinoza's attempt to show that experience is explainable is genuinely different from, say, a hermeneutic approach. The intention is neither to understand the experience of other subjects in the horizon of one's own experience nor to fuse one's own horizon with the horizons of other subjects. In order to explain somebody else's experience, or even experience that is alien to us, it is much more crucial to acquire knowledge about a subject's physical constitution. Even though this kind of knowledge might not tell us anything about the phenomenal aspects of experience, it nonetheless enables us to gauge the extent

to which an event will be experienced and, thus, to determine the existential relevance of affections. And, as for explaining and understanding the experience of, say, bats, we can at least pose the question of whether such physiological knowledge about the constitution of bats is not much more important than knowing the phenomenal qualia determining bat consciousness.

Interlude

THE FUNCTION OF PHYSICS FOR SPINOZA'S PHILOSOPHY

IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY of mind, most references to physics or neurophysiology occur in the context of whether mental states can be reduced to physical states or whether they supervene on them. Consequently, when philosophers refer to the natural sciences in an affirmative way, their intention is mostly to advocate for a reductionist or functionalist materialism. Conversely, critics of this position also tend to react defensively to findings made by the natural sciences.

Spinoza's treatment of physics is based on a completely different scenario. Immediately after the introduction of the concept of the human mind, Spinoza's exposition of his theory of mind is interrupted by a lengthy physical digression—the intention of which is clearly neither to reduce human states of consciousness to physical facts nor to define them on the basis of the causal role of the physical states they accompany.¹ It speaks volumes that he develops the concept of the human mind by referring to axioms that articulate phenomenological facts: Spinoza is obviously aware that we could never explain what turns humans into subjects if we were to reject these axioms. Apparently, the phenomenological facts contained in these axioms are indispensable prerequisites for developing a theory of the human mind.

Yet, Spinoza never becomes a phenomenologist. On the contrary, as soon as he thinks that he has conclusively ruled out any possibility of mind transfer,

1. Spinoza has no knowledge of the modern concept of consciousness; see my remarks about *conscientia* in Part IV, Chapter 13, § a. Let us assume, for a moment, that the knowledge constituting the human mind is distinct from other knowledge in that it consists in a non-transferable self-knowledge. If this is the case, then the passage in 2p13 in which Spinoza derives the concept of the human mind—a passage that is meant to prove the existence of this kind of self-knowledge—could be read as an objection to physicalist positions. Yet, Spinoza ultimately addresses a different kind of problem in 2p13; see Part III, Chapter 10, § d.

he chooses to interrupt his reflections about the human mind, embarking on a physical digression which roughly describes the foundations of his philosophy of nature. He does so before he even starts inquiring into the contents of human experience. What is remarkable about this digression is that it introduces new axioms and lemmas, which underlines that this passage is something entirely new, something that cannot be derived from anything that has been said before, including the axioms of the first two parts of the *Ethics*. Apparently, Spinoza knows well that his physics introduces a heterogeneous body of knowledge.² In fact, this is entirely plausible: the physical digression deals with the physical properties of bodies and the laws governing their interaction; and even though these properties and laws must be compatible with the metaphysics proposed in Part One, they cannot simply be deduced from it.³ And neither can they be inferred from the axioms of Part Two. According to 2ax4, “[w]e feel that a certain body is affected in many ways.” From this phenomenological fact, we can merely conclude that our body “exists, as we are aware of it,”⁴ which tells us nothing about the physiology of the human body. Now, we have seen that the body’s ability to be affected by events depends upon its physical constitution. Moreover, if we take 2p12 into account, our body’s constitution also determines what events the human mind can perceive. Thus, if we were deprived of these external insights, we would be hard-pressed to say anything about the contents of our perception.⁵

Apparently, Spinoza thinks that the phenomenological facts laid down at the beginning of Part Two are essential for elucidating those preconditions of his theory of mind that are related with the very fact of our being subjects of experience. But he also seems to believe that they are insufficient when it comes to explaining what thoughts, perceptions, sensations, or feelings we have. But what exactly, according to Spinoza’s theory of mind, are the limits of phenomenological insights? To answer this question, we must take a closer look at the kind of knowledge set out in the physical digression, and we must analyze how Spinoza employs this knowledge in later stages of his theory of the human mind.

2. The nomenclature of the individual affects constitutes a similar external store of knowledge. This nomenclature is the implicit guiding principle behind Spinoza’s theory of affects. For its origin, see Voss 1981.

3. For the relationship between physics and metaphysics, see also Part I, Chapter 3, § b, as well as my remarks about Spinoza’s correspondence with Tschirnhaus, Part II, Chapter 4.

4. See 2p13c: “From this it follows that man consists of a mind and a body, and that the human body exists, as we are aware of it” (C I, 457; G II, 96).

5. 2p12 has thus a mediating function, which can be seen very well from the use Spinoza makes of this proposition after the physical digression, for instance, in 2p14, 2p17, 2p19, and 2p22.

Purely in terms of content, the physical digression is based largely on Cartesian ideas. Spinoza takes his cue from Descartes' mechanics—and not, say, from Galileo's kinematics, which would have been another historical possibility.⁶ On the other hand, he does not yet anticipate Newton's dynamical approach.⁷ But Spinoza interprets Descartes' physics along the lines of a general philosophy of nature, and he does so more decisively than Descartes himself.⁸ The digression does more than simply analyze bodies by their laws of motion; it actually discusses what defines the nature of bodies—which, as Spinoza makes clear in 2p13sLem7s, includes the nature of the universe or nature as a whole.⁹ Yet, compared to Descartes' own accounts—such as those in *Le monde* or those in the second to fourth parts of the *Principles*—Spinoza's remarks remain quite rudimentary. They contain only the most crucial basic concepts and principles, and in contrast to Descartes, Spinoza does not bother with explaining particular natural phenomena. Thus, the physical digression is not really a treatise in natural philosophy. It is more like a theoretical sketch—a recapitulation of thoughts with which the reader is supposed to be familiar.¹⁰

What, then, is the purpose of this theoretical sketch? First, we should recall what 2p13s says about the different degrees of animation, a topic we discussed just now. According to this scholium, some knowledge of physics is necessary because the degree of animation correlates with an object's ability to suffer and to act, which also determines how likely it is that the object perceives the affections to

6. Around the same time, Huygens chooses an identical path. See Gaukroger 2011, 120 and 125.

7. This has sometimes been suggested, based on a physical interpretation of the term *conatus*. As I maintain below, the term certainly refers to the physical concept of inertia, but its character is genuinely ontological. Spinoza needs this principle for the following reason: the physical principles he develops after 2p13s simply aren't enough to say why individuals strive for self-preservation or at least tend to do so (see also Bartuschat 1992a, 93–4 and 136). This requires a dynamic aspect in the individual but not necessarily a physical dynamics.

8. Des Chene 1996, 2, makes clear that Descartes already considered his physics to be a functional equivalent not only to Aristotelian physics but to natural philosophy in general. If in the following I only refer to Spinoza's *physics*, this is merely for the sake of simplicity and not to contest its intended status as a natural philosophy.

9. In Spinoza scholarship, the claim that nature as a whole constitutes an individual is often quoted as evidence that infinite and finite modes are conceptually linked. It is possible that there is a connection here, but in terms of natural philosophy, it is, in my opinion, more important that Spinoza uses this claim to guarantee the continuity within nature, thus giving expression to his view that the Aristotelian distinction between a sublunary and a supralunary sphere has been resolved.

10. Spinoza himself makes this explicit when he says, at the end of 2p13sLem7s, "If it had been my intention to deal expressly with [the] body [out of an interest in physics], I ought to have explained and demonstrated these things more fully" (C I, 462; G II, 102).

which it is subject. As we have shown above, this is meant to provide some sort of model for determining the extent to which an object actually experiences the events in which it is involved.¹¹

Yet, this covers only one of the functions of the physical digression. As we can see from later references to its propositions, the physics has an additional, epistemological purpose. In the *Ethics*, physical propositions, definitions, or postulates are also used to indicate the natural limitations of human self-knowledge¹² or to explain how the human being is able to possess common notions and, thus, actual knowledge.¹³ Or they are used to lay a general foundation for the moral assessment of certain affects and their impact on the subject.¹⁴ And last but not least, Part Five refers to both the physics and the theory of common notions to argue that it must in principle be possible to form a clear and distinct concept of any affection of the body.¹⁵ Looking over these various epistemological applications, we can say that the sketch of his physics following 2p13 is key in making it possible for philosophy to adopt an external perspective on human thought.

Thus, the physical digression fulfills a second epistemological function, and this function is genuinely critical or, more precisely, self-critical. Concretely speaking, the train of thought is this: to provide an external point of view from which one's own thought can be assessed, philosophy sometimes requires external knowledge, which makes it possible to observe human individuals from the outside. The main idea is that we need this kind of external knowledge to test and correct that which seems epistemically self-evident to us, in our natural perception of things. Thus, even though the insights laid down in the physical digression may be rudimentary, the conviction that somebody actually *has* these insights is, for Spinoza, a necessary condition for an enlightened and self-critical reflection on one's own thought.

At the beginning of this section, I asked what kinds of limitation there are for phenomenological insights, according to Spinoza. We can now point out two

11. See Part III, Chapter 11. Congruent with this model, Part Two of the *Ethics* refers to the physics in the propositions immediately following the digression, i.e., 2p14, 2p15, 2p16, and 2p17c. As to Part Three, see also the references in both postulates within the theory of affects, as well as 3p51 and 3p57.

12. In this context, the digression is quoted mostly in 2p19, 2p24, and 2p28.

13. See especially 2p37 and 2p38c.

14. For this point, see 4p38 and 4p39. 4p38 relies on the physics only indirectly, via 2p14. Note that both propositions proceed from the view that virtue is identical with successful self-preservation. When Spinoza evaluates certain affects by their effect on the body, he simply applies this point of view to the preservation of the body.

15. See 5p4.

aspects. First, we are not, merely on the basis of phenomenological facts, able to decide on whether a being has a mind and experience. Even if we have to take recourse to phenomenological facts in order to explain what it means to have a mind and to have experiences, there is no way to tell for sure which things have experiences, which events they experience, or how they actually experience them. Second, phenomenological reflection cannot provide us with a point of view from which we could evaluate concrete mental content with respect to its epistemic value. Thus, if we follow the implications of how the axioms are used in the *Ethics*, we would have to say that phenomenology provides no escape from the subjective view of things, neither psychologically nor epistemologically.¹⁶ This is why even philosophy of mind sometimes needs to take recourse to physical knowledge that is considered reliable, and this knowledge is developed very concisely in the physical digression following 2p13.

This is not to say, however, that the philosophical reflection on human thought culminates in a kind of physicalism. On the contrary. First of all, physics provides only an external basic knowledge for cognitive psychology. When cognitive psychology seeks to explain perception, it may rely on physics, but the psychological explanation itself is nonetheless distinct from it. It will soon become clear that for experiencing and perceiving an affection, the underlying physical event matters less than the way in which affections are processed in the imagination.¹⁷ Second, the epistemological justification of the objective point of view that physics enables does not depend on any specific physical observation. What is more important are the common properties attributed to all bodies.¹⁸ Third, we must realize that the later parts of the *Ethics* also contain remarks that could easily be classified as phenomenological. Consider, for instance, how, in the definition of the secondary affects in Part III, Spinoza refers to the content of ideas. His argument shows that the variety of our affects ultimately depends on the different content of our ideas—or, more precisely, on their representational content. And that makes perfect sense: imagine someone using only physical or biological facts, or facts provided by the psychology of cognition, in order to explicate the

16. In my view, this is actually compatible with an understanding of phenomenology according to Husserl. But we need to differentiate here. First, the claim that phenomenology does not carry us beyond a subjective view of things is not identical with the allegation that Cartesianism is a form of solipsism. Phenomenology is very capable of carving out superindividual patterns from subjective experience and perception (for this differentiation, see Soldati 2003, 115–6). Second, this claim says nothing about the usefulness of phenomenological statements for empirical or epistemological investigations.

17. See Part IV, Chapter 12.

18. See also my analysis of the common notions and their justification, in Part IV, Chapter 14, § c.

difference between envy and jealousy or between pity and kindness—sooner or later, that person would find himself beset by serious conceptual difficulties. The difference between emotions often forces us to reflect on the content of their underlying ideas and to reflect on them precisely in the shape and form in which they present themselves to the subject. In a word, Spinoza does not seem to be hostile to phenomenological considerations; he just denies that we can derive any cognitive psychological explanation from them or use them to justify epistemological claims.

In Spinoza as well as in philosophy in general, philosophical reflections on the content of human thought can be conducted under very different methodological premises. First, we can investigate what exactly a specific mental state represents to a subject. Second, we can probe into the origins of this representation, from a cognitive-psychological point of view. And finally, we can discuss whether this representation conveys knowledge of some extramental being. It is perfectly possible to assess the same thought in three different ways: phenomenologically, through a psychology of cognition, and in terms of its epistemic value. The decisive question, then, is not which one of these theoretical approaches is the correct one. We should rather ask ourselves how we are to combine the different kinds of reflection in such a fashion as would allow us to preserve their respective contributions, requirements, and limitations. Taking the content of our thoughts into account, we need a critical-integrative approach, rather than a reductionist one. As will be shown in the following section, Spinoza illustrates this insight quite vividly in a number of passages.

PART IV

Psychology and Epistemology

The Constitution, Experiential Quality,
and Epistemic Value of Content

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The Constitution of Mental Content in the imaginatio

A PERSON'S EXPERIENCES do not simply depend on the events in which that person is involved. At least as important is the way in which these events are processed psychologically. Earlier, when we discussed the different degrees of animation, we noted that to be considered an experience, an event needs to be perceived by the object affected by it: just like bats and humans, a triangle drawn on a blackboard can be affected by certain events; and yet, we would hesitate to say that experience is involved in all these cases. If the triangle on the blackboard is smudged by a wet sponge, we would not qualify this event as an experience that the triangle has. This intuition, which puts limitations on our use of the concept of experience, does not contradict Spinoza's theory of universal animation, at least on the interpretation given above. It has, on the contrary, been shown that this very theory can serve as a heuristic model for deciding, on the basis of good reasons, when experience is present—and, thus, to what extent an object actually experiences the events in which it is involved.¹

Anyone who wants to advocate the explicability of experience, however, cannot be satisfied by this. Simply to say that a thing experiences certain events to a greater or lesser degree amounts to a rather weak statement. In addition, we would want to know how exactly we are to conceive of the perception of events, as well as the mental processing that transforms them into experience. Only if we have a systematic grasp on these things can we assume that nothing crucial—viz., how or as what someone experiences an event—has eluded us in our attempt to explain experience. If we want to maintain that experience is explainable, we must therefore be able to prove that the psychological processing of events is based on

1. See Part III, Chapter 11.

general laws, which have a specific effect on the way in which someone thinks about the events that happen to him or her.

Spinoza addresses this problem mainly in his theory of the imagination, the presentation of which immediately follows the physical digression. The *Ethics* employs the word *imaginatio* primarily in connection with our representations of certain particulars. But the term also refers to the process by which these representations are generated—and this is nothing other than the mental operation by which subjects of experience perceive the affections of their own bodies and produce ideas of them. As such, the process of imagination yields conceptions not only of external things but also of the subject's own body and its affective states. Yet, the converse is also true for Spinoza's approach: for Spinoza, it is mostly (if not always) the case that our perception of our body's affections manifests itself in representations of external objects (i.e., objects that are distinct from our own body).

At first glance, this last item may seem rather unusual. Anti-representationalist theories of consciousness assume that consciousness and intentionality are two different properties of the mind which can in principle appear separately.² Consequently, we would have to be able to experience affections without thinking about any specific object. In the philosophical tradition, this assumption of two separate features of mentality is often used to distinguish sensations from perceptions or moods from emotions. Spinoza does not seem to be wholly opposed to these kinds of distinctions. The definitions of the affects, for instance, which can be found in the appendix to Part Three, suggest that the primary affects are largely lacking an object. Some characterizations of particular affects, such as the description of cheerfulness in 4p42, further invite a comparison between primary affects and moods.³ Finally, it is striking that Spinoza employs the verbs *sentire* and *percipere* differently; the first is used mostly in connection with one's own body, whereas the second is not. Considering this usage, we can assume that Spinoza acknowledges the difference between sensing and perceiving at least on a phenomenological level. And yet, a number of passages in the *Ethics* clearly contradict the view that we are dealing with two different kinds of processes, such that there are non-representational states over and above the representations we

2. For a survey of this controversy, see Chalmers 2004.

3. According to 4p42d, cheerfulness is the consciousness of an increase in the body's power of acting going back to an equally strong affection of all parts of the body. At issue here is obviously the experience of one's own vitality. Yet, an intentional aspect comes into play nonetheless, via the mind's relationship with the body; see C I, 570; G II, 241–2. For the question of phenomenal qualities, see also Huenemann, who maintains that the truly wise person—were it not for the intellectual love of God—would be quite similar to the zombie haunting today's theory of consciousness (2004, 29).

have. In 2ax3, for instance, Spinoza assumes that ideas are involved in all passions.⁴ Occasionally, he even ignores the difference between one's perception of one's own body and one's perception of foreign bodies—and he does so in some fairly significant passages.⁵

What is it that prompts Spinoza to reject the idea of non-representational mental states? Two motives stand out. First, recalling the previous discussion of the concept of idea, it turned out to be a crucial prerequisite of Spinoza's rationalism that all mental states can ultimately be described and explicated by means of ideas. This holds true even for the primary affects, at least if we take at face value the example of cupidity, which Spinoza mentions in 2ax3. Note that desire, for Spinoza, is not *caused* by the idea of an object of desire.⁶ But in order to capture a concrete instance of desire in its mental dimension and to describe its direction, we must nonetheless assume that the subject has an idea of an object that appears desirable to him. Second, Spinoza's rejection of non-representational mental states also has a psychological implication. According to his conception of the process of imagination, our mind has the tendency to generate ideas whenever we feel any affection of our own body. These ideas are not only about ourselves but also about the things that affect us and the events that happen to us. This diagnosis implies a certain skeptical attitude toward any claim of immediacy. However, the reason for such skepticism is not to be found in the notion of there being intermediaries involved in all perception, but rather it has psychological roots. According to Spinoza, we cannot undergo any sensation or feeling without perceiving, in the very same event, some external object.

This, I think, corresponds quite well with our everyday notion of experience. We generally assume that any experience, even though we may consider it emphatically our own, relates us to some external object. This is why we also assume that experience has the epistemic effect of rendering external objects accessible. Granted, this says nothing about the exact nature or structure of the object in question—it may consist in a fact, an event, a state, or an environment. But it is

4. See also Part II, Chapter 5.

5. See especially 2p49s, which states that “we can sense, or perceive, infinitely many bodies by the same faculty of sensing” (C I, 488; G II, 133). For Della Rocca, it is problematic that Spinoza uses the term “sense” (*sentire*) for external bodies here (1996b, 178, remark 25). But this is not a problem if the interpretation of 2p13 given above is correct. On this interpretation, our concept of our own body is itself determined, in its particular representational content, by our perception of affections that involve us.

6. See 3p9s, where Spinoza draws the following conclusion from the claim that the mind, too, possesses a *conatus*: “From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it” (C, 500; G II, 148).

clear that experience, as we ordinarily understand the term, always includes some kind of external reference. In having experiences, we intuitively assume, subjects are epistemically connected to something other than themselves.⁷

Now, recall that, according to Spinoza's concept of the imagination, our perception of affections is necessarily accompanied by representations of external objects. Thus, as strange as this claim may appear at first glance, it can actually be considered a paradigmatic description of subjective experience. It stipulates that to have an experience three conditions must be fulfilled: I have an experience if and only if, first, something happens to the body that I, in my capacity as a mind, identify as my own body; second, I perceive this event; which perception, third, goes along with my having representations of external bodies.

In the following, I elaborate on these considerations to give a more detailed account of Spinoza's theory of the imagination. First, I embark on a brief analysis of Spinoza's use of the term *imaginatio* in the *Ethics*, to see what it tells us about the question of the reality of our perceptions in general (a). In a second step, I turn to the central event in imaginative processes, namely our perception of things affecting our bodies. Here, too, the main task will be to investigate the claim that we have ideas of these affections and to see what this implies for the explanation of our perception of singular things (b). In a final step, I will focus on the role of contingent factors influencing the production of representations, such as biography, history, and semantics. I discuss what principles Spinoza has at his disposal for subjecting even such contingent factors to a lawful necessity (c).

The problem of the emotions will be addressed in a separate chapter.⁸ This corresponds to the weight given to this topic in the *Ethics* itself. Admittedly, Spinoza considers emotions—or, in classical terminology, affects—as a form of imaginative experience, which is why they fundamentally belong to a theory of the human mind. Yet, they occupy a special place therein, insofar as they relate to changes in the power of individuals—and thus, ultimately, of bodies. As a result, the intelligibility of emotions depends on a few additional principles, the knowledge of which can be neglected in the discussion of the imagination itself. This, in turn, corresponds with the fact that our emotional life, even more than other perceptual or imaginative representations, is determined by biographical influences or cultural history. The discussion of the intelligibility of emotions, therefore, both requires additional theoretical foundations and leads straight to

7. This can be reconciled with today's rather fashionable call to "experience yourself," for we experience ourselves precisely when we encounter ourselves anew or discover new aspects of our personality. In those cases, we relate to ourselves as to an external point of reference.

8. See Chapter 13.

Spinoza's ethical project. This is why I have chosen to treat this topic in a separate chapter, just as the text of the *Ethics* itself suggests.

a) *Intension and Extension of Spinoza's Concept of the Imagination and Its Implications*

In the *Ethics*, the terms "imagination" and "imagine" occur in two different contexts.⁹

1. On the one hand, the verb "to imagine," *imaginari*, refers to the mental process by which our representations of singular things are generated. It is in the passages from 2p16 to 2p18, in particular, that Spinoza describes this process; thus, these propositions contain, in a nutshell, all basic parameters of his theory of the imagination. However, this theory operates on a rather abstract level, such that various processes are accounted for by one and the same general model. Spinoza makes no attempt to explore the real causes of our representations in all their diversity and complexity. But, as he states in 2p17s, after having addressed the issue of representations of nonexistent objects, "This can happen from other causes also, but it is sufficient for me here to have shown one [cause] through which I can explain it as if I had shown it through its true cause."¹⁰ In other words, when Spinoza conceives of the mental process by which our representations are generated, he does not claim that this conception is empirically confirmed—he merely claims that it represents a plausible reconstruction.
2. On the other hand, the verbal noun "imagination," *imaginatio*, is employed in a terminologically distinguished manner in 2p40s2, which deals with the epistemological classification of different types of ideas. Here, Spinoza subsumes knowledge "from singular things" and knowledge "from signs" into the first kind, or rather *genus*, of knowledge, which he then labels "opinion, or imagination." As emphasized in the next proposition, ideas of this kind are fundamentally inadequate. What that means for the epistemic value of ideas generated by the imagination will be discussed below. Right now, I consider it more important to point out that, with this move, Spinoza in effect enriches the palette of possible products generated by processes of the imagination, and he does so in rather unexpected ways. For him, knowledge

9. For a detailed account of Spinoza's use of these terms, see Parkinson 1954, 138–62, as well as De Deugd 1966, 197–9.

10. C I, 464; G II, 105.

of the first genus includes both knowledge gained from sense experience—which he calls “knowledge from random experience”—and knowledge that has been passed on, mediated by signs. Moreover, Spinoza also makes it clear that he sees a connection between the activity of the imagination and semi-otic processes. Moreover, it follows from 2p40s that he even takes universals and transcendentals, too, to—from an epistemological point of view—count among the first genus of knowledge.¹¹ After all, this subsumption of different kinds of ideas under the umbrella term *imaginatio* merely forms the summary of the preceding discussion.

There exist several connections between these two uses—let’s call them psychological versus epistemological—of the concept of imagination. To see what these connections are based on, consider what kind of process Spinoza refers to with the verb *imaginari*. In 2p17 and 2p17s, this process is described roughly as follows: the mind imagines something if and only if it views some external, affecting body through the idea of some affection of its own body, which idea also represents that external body. For that to be the case, it is necessary for one’s own body to be subject to some affection—that is, to be in a specific state of affection¹² which has been caused by some external body. And this in turn implies that the mind considers that external body to be present or actually existing.¹³

In this conception of the process of the imagination, two points stand out:

1. The process is characterized by an irreducible complexity.¹⁴ For one thing, it depends on various physical prerequisites, even though we are dealing with a mental process. Not all individuals can have representations—only those to which a mind can be ascribed or which, in other words, are of a certain complexity. Furthermore, there must be some external body which either affects one’s own body right now or has affected it at some point in the past. And finally, the affections must be strong enough and of a kind such that the affected

11. See also the discussion in Parkinson 1954, 148.

12. In 2p16 and 2p17, Spinoza seems to distinguish between the events by which bodies are affected, *modi, quibus corpus aliquod afficitur*, and the state of being affected, *affectio corporis*. Yet, later in the text, he mostly refers only to the ideas of the affections of some body, which represent both at the same time. Apparently, he thinks that the distinction is negligible at the level of ideas. For an explanation, see also § c of this chapter.

13. See 2p17 and 2p17c, C I, 463–4; G II, 104–5.

14. This irreducible complexity is also emphasized by Macherey 1997a, 171, who says that mental life in the imagination has the “form of an unanalyzable complex.” This is an exaggeration, of course: something irreducibly complex does not have to be unanalyzable.

individual may have an idea of them. For another thing, there are also various ideas involved in each *imaginatio*: aside from the idea of the external body that is the subject matter of the actual imagination, the mind must also have an idea of the affections of its own body. An individual has some idea of an external representation if and only if it perceives some affection of its body. Moreover, having ideas of affections of one's own body already presupposes some idea of this body.¹⁵

2. Spinoza's term *imaginari* does not correspond with the English equivalents "imagine" or "fantasize," either intensionally or extensionally.¹⁶ At issue is not only the mental act we perform when we picture nonexistent or absent things but, in fact, any act of thinking of some object as present, *regardless* of whether the object actually is present or not and regardless of whether we think of it as actually existing or as mere fantasy. For Spinoza, even the perception of something that is currently present constitutes a case of *imaginatio*.

This latter point is particularly instructive if we take tradition into account since scholastic philosophy (including Dutch scholasticism) often employed the term *imaginatio* as the Latin equivalent to Aristotle's *phantasia*.¹⁷ While it is true that *phantasia* is considered a matter of sensibility rather than the intellect,¹⁸ it differs from perception (*aisthesis*) in that it represents things that are in fact absent—which is why, for Aristotle himself, *phantasia* is closer to insight (*noein*) than *aisthesis*. In the seventeenth century, this idea—that the mind refers to absent objects—remained at the conceptual core of the concept of *imaginatio*. Even Descartes, who occasionally aligns the imagination with the geometrical intuition,¹⁹ is unwilling to question the cognitive-psychological difference between the

15. For this last point, see also my remarks about 2p12 in Part III, Chapter 10, § c. Spinoza refers to 2p12 in 2p17 as well as 2p17c. Via 2p17c, 2p18 also relies on that proposition.

16. In quite another way, it would also be misleading to align Spinoza's term "imagination" with the assumption of some faculty. As De Deugd 1966, 35, rightly emphasizes, "The idea of a 'faculty of imagination' is conspicuously absent from Spinoza's writings."

17. See Aristotle *De anima*, III, 427 b–c (1984, I, 680); Deuber-Mankowsky 1998 presents a fascinating new reading of Aristotle's *phantasia*.

18. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (2002, 73–7).

19. See CSM II, 50; AT VII, 72; as well as the letter to Elisabeth dated June 28, 1643. In this letter, Descartes correlates the different "primitive notions" with certain kinds of knowledge (AT III, 691–2; CSM, 226–7). The difference between Descartes and Spinoza here is small but nonetheless significant, which can be seen from the following formulations. When, in the sixth Meditation, Descartes distinguishes the imagination from pure understanding, he writes: "When I imagine a triangle, for example, I do not merely understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also intuit or imagine them as if they were present; and this is what I call imagining" (AT VII, 72; CSM II 50, translation altered in final

act of picturing something that is not currently present and the act of perceiving something that is.²⁰ Or consider Clauberg, for whom the imagination is unequivocally defined by its dissimilarity to the perception of present objects.²¹

Spinoza's concept of imagination departs from this traditional view: while acknowledging the traditional difference between intellect and imagination, he attributes to the latter any and all psychological phenomena in which sensibility is involved. These include phenomena such as sensing (*sentire*), perceiving (*percipere*), and observing (*contemplari*), as well as memory (*memoria*) and the formation of symbols.²² It is therefore perfectly consistent that Spinoza considers knowledge from signs or hearsay to belong to the category of "opinion, or imagination."

The question is, of course, why, despite his departure from the traditional concept, Spinoza still employs Aristotelian terminology. When, for instance, the term *imaginatio* is introduced, Spinoza not only takes recourse in the images of things, *rerum imagines*—a term that traditionally stands for the Aristotelian *phantasmata*—but he explicitly states that these are "the customary words."²³ If we recall how far Spinoza strays from tradition in his very conception of the imagination, this must be seen as a calculated move: it indicates that his own account of the process by which we imagine absent things dismisses any categorical difference between perceiving and visualizing things. We would do well not to underestimate this point: of course, Spinoza knows the phenomenological differences between imagination and perception. I would even say that he perfectly well accepts these differences on a phenomenological level, seeing as he often uses the terms exactly as one would expect. But, on a theoretical level,

sentence). Spinoza, on the other hand, says that the mind will regard the body "as actually existing, or present to it" (2p17; C I, 463–4; G II, 104). Spinoza's wording lacks any trace of an "as if."

20. This is borne out by the definitions in the *Passions of the Soul*, despite Descartes' use of the term "perception," in this text, to refer to all mental acts. There, the "imagination" is, on the one hand, described as the act performed when "our soul endeavors to imagine something non-existent" (CSM I, 336; AT XI, 344); on the other hand, imagination is also explained as "perceptions caused by the body," which, however, do not depend on the nerves, as all other kinds of perceptions do (CSM I, 336; AT XI, 344).

21. See Clauberg's definition in his physics: "Atque in hoc ipso Phantasia seu Imaginatio consistit, quod non ad rem ipsam externo sensui praesentem, sed ad ejus imaginem, id est, praeteritae impressionis vestigium mentis obtutum convertimus" (1968 [1691], II, 202).

22. For the latter, see also 2p18s. For the role played by symbols in the theory of the imagination, see Vinciguerra 2001b and 2005. Already in the TdIE, §§ 81–90, Spinoza emphasizes how fundamental the imagination is for sensitive perception.

23. See 2p17s, C I, 465; G II, 106.

this simply does not matter for him—according to his psychology of cognition, every perception ultimately amounts to an act of the imagination, just as every imagination is ultimately based on perception.²⁴ We can make these distinctions, and it is not completely pointless to do so, as long as we merely intend to provide a description of mental phenomena from the subjective point of view. But when it comes to explaining these phenomena and examining their processing from a cognitive-psychological point of view, the subject's perspective is completely irrelevant.

How, then, are we to explain the exceptionally broad range of application of the term *imaginatio* in Spinoza? In conclusion, we can say that it derives from his psychological account that aims to explain the generation of any and all sensibility-based ideas in terms of a single mental process. Spinoza's exact definition of this process will be investigated further in the following two sections. But let me make one thing clear right away: Spinoza makes no distinction, from a cognitive-psychological perspective, between perception and imagination—and by no means does this undermine his fundamental realism. On the contrary, his theory of the imagination makes it possible to determine, with great accuracy, the irreducible hook onto reality that even the most absurd human ideas provide us with, for every imagination presupposes that someone has at least once been affected in a relevant way by some external body. Against this background, maintaining that perception and imagination are, psychologically speaking, the same does not amount to reducing the former to the latter—it rather indicates the dissolution of two apparent opposites into one continuum.

Thus, Spinoza's motto is by no means "Everything is imaginary!" He would rather say, "Wherever there is imagination, there also is reality; and if you did not shy away from the intellectual effort, you could at least attempt to determine for each singular instance of imagination what affection it actually refers to. Yet," he might add, with a hint of irony, "when something seems to be right before your eyes, imagination certainly is involved as well." In other words, here, Spinoza is seeking to resist the temptations of both kinds of epistemological extreme—skepticism and naive, or direct, realism. Grouping all sensitive processes under the umbrella of his concept of imagination, he simply bypasses both extremes.²⁵

24. Gueroult 1974, 212, also emphasizes this lack of difference between perception and imagination.

25. For the problem of skepticism, also see Part II, Chapter 5, § b, footnote 36.

*b) Synthesis without Spontaneity: On
the Perception of the Affections of One's Own Body
and Its Implications*

Within the framework of Spinoza's approach, the imagination marks the point at which *experiencing* becomes mental content. As suggested in the previous section, this always involves three kinds of ideas: ideas of the affections of our bodies, ideas of the external bodies, and ideas referring to our own bodies.²⁶ It is the interplay between these three ideas, or complexes of ideas, that determines how we experience certain events. Various, often heterogeneous, kinds of relations exist between these three ideas or complexes of ideas—relations that the *Ethics* discusses in several places.²⁷

The framework is, by and large, set out already in proposition 2p16 and its corollaries. This proposition is centered around the assumption that, in the process of imagination, two of the three ideas are contained (or, in Spinoza's word, "involved") in the third, namely the idea of the affection of one's own body. As we shall see, Spinoza has his reasons for describing the relations among the three ideas in this way, rather than claiming, for instance, that all ideas originate in the idea of one's own body. At this point, it suffices to say that these ideas can be distinguished only by analysis, which is to say that they form a unity or constitute one mental act. This also means, however, that these ideas can be discerned in any act of the imagination. Or, as Spinoza says in 2p16,

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.²⁸

Considered against the physical background to which Spinoza refers in the demonstration to this proposition, the point here is trivial. By definition, what we call affections of our body consist in interactions with other bodies, and this also

26. As we have seen above, Spinoza distances himself from the view that we could ever have something like simple ideas. According to 2p15, the idea of one's own body, which constitutes the mind, is complex as well. Thus, if Spinoza talks of particular ideas in the singular—for instance, the idea of an affection, the idea of one's own body, or the idea of the external, affecting body—this is always a simplified way of speaking.

27. This chapter focuses on 2p16–2p18, but many other propositions deal with the relationships between these three ideas as well, in one way or another. In the second part alone, these are 2p19, 2p22, 2p23, 2p25, 2p26, 2p27, 2p28, 2p29, 2p39, and indirectly 2p45.

28. C, 463; G II, 103. I assume that the term "mode," in this passage, is not used in the sense given to it in 1def5.

holds with respect to the interactions between different parts of the body.²⁹ It is hardly surprising that the character of these kinds of events is determined by the nature of all the bodies involved.

This does not explain, however, why this should also manifest itself in our ideas of affections. It is by no means self-evident that the complexity of an event carries over to our perception of the event. Why should this be the case? Don't we know countless examples in which complex ideas reflect very simple events and vice versa? Let's assume we see a ball running down an inclined plane—how are we justified in assuming that the imagined event is even half as complicated as our idea of it?

Indeed, 2p16d shows that Spinoza does not simply assert an isomorphism between the physical and the mental sides of affections. This demonstration harks back to 1ax4, which articulates one of Spinoza's rationalist principles: that "[t]he knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause."³⁰ Among Spinoza scholars, this axiom is sometimes quoted as evidence that the *Ethics* relies on the principle of sufficient reason, which is never explicitly stated.³¹ Regardless of the exact meaning of 1ax4, it is clear that the purpose of 2p16 is not merely to state a cognitive-psychological fact; instead, Spinoza invokes the ontological context underlying the process described. The exact train of thought here seems to be this: let us assume that we come to know the effects of some event—which is certainly the case if we have an idea of an affection of our body—then we must also accept that the corresponding cause can be known, regardless of its complexity. Here, Spinoza says nothing about the precise information or

29. See the axiom immediately following 2p13lem3c. This axiom, to which Spinoza refers in his proof, makes precisely this point: that the different ways of being affected result from the nature of both the affecting and the affected body: "All modes by which a body is affected by another body follow both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body" (C I, 460; G II, 99). This, notably, does not preclude that in ascribing action to someone, we may distinguish between the agent and the patient of the action. It only shows how important it is, for the *Ethics*, to distinguish between an ontological and a physical description of things. This dualism of perspectives is discussed earlier: see Part I, Chapter 3, § b.

30. C I, 410; G II, 46.

31. See Della Rocca 2003a, 76–7, as well as 2002 and 2011. In these texts, Della Rocca shows that the principle of sufficient reason lays the foundation for crucial parts of Spinoza's ontology. Later, he even goes so far as to reconstruct Spinoza's entire philosophy on the basis of this principle (Della Rocca 2008). That Spinoza assumes such a principle was already suggested by Schütt 1985, 175. For the interpretation of 1ax4, see also Deleuze 1968, 142; Gueroult 1968, 95–8; Bennett 1984, 127–8; and Wilson 1999, 141–65. Wilson criticizes a number of common simplifications, especially Gueroult's restriction of the axiom to adequate knowledge and the often-heard claim that Spinoza conflates the relations of causality and logical implication. I agree with her criticism regarding these two points.

the cognitions contained in the idea of the body's affection. Rather, he indicates that this idea will be composed in such a way that we have access—at least in principle—to the causes of the underlying affection. This requires that this idea contain, at least implicitly, the ideas of all the bodies involved in the affection.

Read in this way, 2p16 is less assailable than would be the case if we did read it as asserting an isomorphism between mental and physical complexity. Of course, one might question why a theory that examines the psychological origin of representational content has to rely on the rationalist claim of the intelligibility of things. I would respond that this is actually the point where Spinoza's rationalist convictions get compelling, for this is where its implications become concrete. For consider what Spinoza rules out here, and it will be difficult not to agree with him to some extent. It is certainly doubtful that we will ever be able to identify all the factors that are involved in our affections and to comprehend their precise effect. But we have little reason to believe that bodies affecting us in any significant way are generally unknown and will remain so forever.

We can therefore conclude that 2p16 is merely meant to posit the fundamental intelligibility of all factors involved in our affections. Spinoza claims that the ideas we have of our bodily affections must also contain an implicit knowledge about ourselves and about external objects. This, however, does not mean that we also possess the concepts we would need to understand these affections through their determining influences and to properly discern the latter.

But what are we to make of this rather abstract claim? What does it entail, with respect to the experience of an affected subject, that any factor involved in its affection is in principle intelligible? It is in 2p16c1 that this question is first addressed. Here, Spinoza infers from 2p16 that "the human mind perceives the nature of a great many bodies together with the nature of its own body."³² Unlike 2p16, which demonstrates generally *that* all causes of our affections must be epistemically accessible to us, the quoted corollary focuses on *what* the human mind perceives on the occasion of its affections.

In order to understand the very point of 2p16c1, we must notice that, in the corollary, the term "nature of the body" has a different reference from its use in the proposition itself. Generally speaking, any reference in the *Ethics* to the "nature of things" can have a variety of meanings, depending on the context of the passage. This becomes particularly apparent in this very passage. Preoccupied with the nature of the human as well as of external bodies, both 2p16 and 2p16c2 consider the bodies' physical constitution and do so from the perspective of a neutral observer. In contrast, 2p16c1 adopts what could almost be called an internal perspective.

32. C I, 463; G II, 104.

Granted, the passage does not ask what affective events feel like in the mind's perception—but it *does* ask how the fact that they are experienced in this way or that way shapes the perception of external bodies. The answer is provided by the general rule that the mind perceives external bodies together with the nature of its own body or, in other words, in accordance with the way in which the latter is actually perceived. In this passage, then, the term “nature” is meant to express the experiential quality, which the mind, when sensing it in its own body, also attributes to other bodies.³³

Thus, 2p16c1 indirectly follows from 2p13c, which concluded from 2p13 (among other things) that “the human body exists, as we are aware of it.” What a mind knows of its body, when it experiences the latter's affections, is simply that this body exists in roughly the same way in which it is currently aware of it. And according to 2p16c1, this “nature” or property of a keenly felt, present existence is also transferred to all other bodies which the mind perceives in conjunction with its own. What this corollary exhibits, then, is nothing less than the very root of any anthropomorphic thought: it belongs to the nature of human sensation, or—what is the same—to the perception of the affection of our own body, that we initially perceive any object as present and actually existing. This point is reinforced by 2p17, which seeks to explain why anything we contemplate is initially considered as actually existing (even if we later come to realize otherwise).

To gauge the significance of this insight, it is important to note that 2p16c1 differs from 2p16 (as well as from later reflections on the association of ideas), by specifying that we perceive the nature of many bodies together with (*una cum*) the nature of our own body; 2p16 itself, on the other hand, states that we perceive these two kinds of bodies at the same time (*simul*). Thus, in 2p16c, we are dealing not with a case of mere simultaneity but rather with a case of genuine synthesis: according to Spinoza, it is one and the same act that has us perceive our own body and the external, affecting bodies, and this one act attaches to external bodies the same keen sense of presence and actual existence that we experience with respect to our own body.³⁴ This act, however, is by no means characterized as spontaneous or something we can produce at will. We only experience it when we

33. According to Hampe (2002, 139), the sensed internal perspective one has toward one's own body plays a crucial role for Spinoza's theory of affects. I think that while this only applies to very few passages of Spinoza's theory of affects, Hampe's observation certainly holds for this corollary, which also is quite important for the topic addressed in Hampe's paper: the perception of one's own body.

34. This is precisely the sense in which 2p16c1 is employed by 2p17, which explains why the things we observe are considered to be *present*. Incidentally, this passage also shows how radically Spinoza distances himself from the view that we could ever have simple ideas. We already saw as much in the discussion of the concept of idea in Part II, Chapter 5, § b.

sense the body's being affected.³⁵ Yet, this is also why Spinoza can safely assume that humans are immediately aware of the external world, for our knowledge of the existence of external bodies is no less necessary and immediate than our knowledge of our own body.

In my view, this is the reason Spinoza claims, in 2p16, that the idea of the affection involves the idea of one's own body: this places the emphasis on the notion that the mind plays a rather passive part in this entire process. Consider what would happen if it were the other way around and the idea of one's own body involved the idea of its affection. We would then have to decide on what else there is in this world by relying solely on the idea constituting the mind or the idea of our own body. If that were the case, we would have to posit that the mind could actively and consciously establish its own epistemic relatedness to the external world. Such a mind would have to be conceived differently: it would have to be endowed with a very specific faculty, some sort of spontaneous intellect or a veridical yet active imagination. But this is precisely what the *Ethics* rejects, by denying to humans any faculty other than the capacity to perceive "a great many bodies."

Overall, Spinoza's views on the body's affections and the way in which they are perceived expects both very much and very little of the human mind. On the one hand, it provides the mind with certain knowledge, knowledge not only of the existence of its own body but also of all other bodies involved in the affections of its body. This, notably, happens in a way that is not reducible to the mere accumulation of impressions but involves the awareness of the overarching process, that is, the very affection at stake. On the other hand, we are dealing here not with a conscious or intentional mental act but with a psychological mechanism that, while effectively directing our sensation, operates on a subconscious level, without the mind's active participation. We could therefore call this a passive synthesis which occurs automatically in the mind.

In the next section, I examine this mental mechanism with respect to its implications for the representational content of our ideas of external things. One thing, however, can be said right away: to posit a mechanism of this kind, that is, a mechanism that governs human perception, which is wholly passive, has quite some problematic consequences for the epistemic value of our perceptions. On the one hand, on perceiving the affections of our body, we perceive not only this specific body as actually existing but other bodies as well. On the other hand, the concepts at our disposal are insufficient for an adequate description of these bodies. As a result, our ideas about a number of bodies will be rather vague,

35. In 2p16c1 (and 2p16c2), Spinoza rejects the idea that having an idea is a spontaneous act. This is also emphasized by Bartuschat (1992a, 97).

which does not prevent us from perceiving them as actually existing—and not only that: we will also believe them to exist in precisely the manner in which we imagine them. Ultimately, this compels us to affirm the existence of things that, upon further analysis, would be revealed to be impossible.

Spinoza himself is well aware of this danger, which represents the flip side of his epistemic determinism.³⁶ In fact, significant parts of his treatment of epistemology articulate reservations resulting from his insight into this danger. While, for instance, 2p25 denies that the knowledge we acquire from the ideas of our body's affections can ever be adequate, later, in the definition of the common notions, Spinoza demonstrates how the conception of bodies must be constituted in order to be necessarily true. We could thus say that Spinoza's epistemology is designed to counter, more or less systematically, any tendency toward anthropomorphic thought.

In 2p16c2, Spinoza already sets out the basis for this strategy when he infers from 2p16 that "the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies."³⁷ In contrast to 2p16c1, this passage again adopts the perspective of a neutral observer. Specifically, Spinoza separates here that which is perceived in an idea from that which the idea indicates, thus employing a distinction that we already encountered in our discussion of the concept of "idea"—the distinction between what we called an idea's representational content and its epistemic value.³⁸ 2p16c2 makes it quite clear that this kind of distinction does indeed exist for Spinoza: what we can know, when having an idea of some external object, is neither that object's presence nor its nature; our knowledge is not to be mistaken for the idea's representational content. And yet the idea has at least a minimal epistemic value—and necessarily so, even though it might be the case that this value reduces to the mere indication of the constitution of one's own body.³⁹

Thus, Spinoza assumes that the representational content of an idea and its epistemic value can diverge. Granted, both are functions of the content of our ideas.

36. Discussed in Part II, Chapter 5, § c.

37. C I, 463, G II, 104.

38. See my remarks in Part II, Chapter 5, § b.

39. This is confirmed by the way in which 2p16c2 is used later, together with the definition of "imagination" from 2p17s. In 4p9d, for instance, Spinoza summarizes these two passages as follows: "An imagination is an idea by which the mind considers a thing as present (see its definition in IIP17S), which nevertheless indicates the constitution of the human body more than the nature of the external thing (by IIP16C2)" (C I, 551; G II, 216). Spinoza would not be able to contrast the two statements, as he does here, were it not for the kind of aspect dualism outlined above.

But that which an idea represents is not identical with the knowledge it conveys to us. 2p16c2 further suggests that this difference is particularly apparent in our ideas of external bodies, for while these ideas certainly indicate that our body is in a particular affective state, all we know about external bodies is that one such body must exist that either is actually putting our body in this state or has done so in the past. Consequently, we should be cautious with regard to any representation of external bodies that has been promoted by some affection of our own body. This does not imply, of course, that the ideas we have of our own body are immune to being inadequate, nor does it preclude us from having any adequate ideas of external bodies. Yet, we can already discern that a crucial role is played, in Spinoza's epistemology, by the reflection on ideas which have ourselves as their proper object. For we can presume that the mind is able to confirm the truth of its ideas to the extent that it is able to comprehend its perceptions as the expression of the constitution of its own body.

This, however, depends on three requirements. It is necessary, first, that the mind actually is capable of reflecting on its own ideas; second, it must have some general knowledge of bodies, knowledge it can use to depart from the immediate perception of bodies afforded by the affection of its own body; third, it must be able to distinguish between its own and other bodies. While the latter requirement is fulfilled, in a rudimentary way, by the concept of the singular mind, the first two points concern epistemic conditions that can only be discussed once we reach the epistemological passages of the *Ethics*.

c) Transitions between Psychology and Semantics: Associations and Other Genetic Contingencies

In the previous section, we discussed how the mind, when perceiving its own body as actually existing, also perceives external bodies as actually existing. For Spinoza, this mechanism is not a marginal phenomenon of human thought. On the contrary, 2p17 places this mechanism at the center of his theory of imagination. We always start out by regarding things as both present and actually existing, due to the ideas we have of the affections of our body—this, for Spinoza, is the crucial mental event on which the constitution of any representations depends. Without this event, there would be no ideas of external bodies, nor any knowledge of one's own body, nor even a mind.

Despite the theoretical weight thus given to this process, a decisive question remains: what is the origin of all those other aspects of representational content, aspects that *prima facie* have nothing to do with the fact that we perceive

ourselves or others as actually existing? For instance, if we return to the problem of the explainability of experience, one might wonder how it comes about that different individuals can have diverging ideas about their affections and about the external bodies involved.

First, we must recall that the *Ethics* maintains a holism of ideas, which stipulates that the representational content of any idea depends on its relations to other ideas.

Thus, how we interpret a given affective event always also depends on the available ideas we may refer to when trying to make sense of the event in question. This, however, only explains why affections can, in principle, be described in various ways by different subjects; it does not show why a given event is actually interpreted in a particular way by some concrete subject.⁴⁰ Consider a case in which someone bumps into a group of people on the subway. Why is it that one of those bumped into takes this to be offensive and rowdy behavior, while another sees only a slightly awkward and inconsequential accident?

At this point, additional considerations come into play. Spinoza thinks that those ideas that guide us in our interpretation of our body's affections are always idiosyncratic, at least to a certain extent. Of course, he does not want to say that these interpretations are a private affair—on the contrary, the influence of biographical factors is identical in kind to the influence of, say, language and culture since both depend on associations among ideas. The fact remains that, for Spinoza, a person's thought is shaped not only by cultural interpretive patterns but also by that person's biography.

One last thing: as we saw above, Spinoza refuses to separate the qualitative aspects of our mental states from the content of our thought.⁴¹ This is very important for our current problem since it shows that our experience of affections is shaped, essentially, by the way in which we understand and describe them.

To conclude, when it comes to the formation of mental content, Spinoza does not categorically distinguish between psychological and semantic influences but assumes, on the contrary, many different causal and constitutive relations and interactions among them. Therefore, it is just as impossible to fully separate the psychological and semantic aspects of individual experience as it is to reduce the one to the other. This is why, in previous passages, I claimed only that Spinoza semanticizes the psychological, rather than asserting that the *Ethics*, in its philosophy of mind, proposes a semantic theory. Spinoza refrains from reducing psychology to semantics, but his view of human thought is marked by the insight that

40. See Part III, Chapter 10, § b.

41. See Part II, Chapter 5 and Chapter 7.

semantic factors are constitutive for the content of our experience; and this insight has perhaps a greater impact on Spinoza than on any of his contemporaries.

It remains to be discussed where the representational content of ideas comes from and why it is the case that affections give rise to different interpretations. Note that what is at issue is not just the psychological origin of our experience—nor is it the public character of our psychological vocabulary. The question is, rather, how the very experience of affections can be determined by semantic influences, while, at the same time, our individual experiences structure the order of our ideas. It would take an entire book alone to discuss this in detail. So I will limit my current inquiry to a few assumptions, which either are explicitly discussed in Spinoza's theory of the imagination or inform this theory implicitly. Three points stand out:

1. According to Spinoza's physics, it is impossible for humans not to be affected at all since they are corporeal individuals among other corporeal individuals. To put it differently, there is no gap, on a purely physiological level, between "being affected" and "not being affected" since the human body is constantly being regenerated—which process ultimately relies on the constant affection of specific parts. Or this is at least what Spinoza's physical postulates require. Thus, the human body is subject to a continuous change of its affective states. This means that at least one of the physiological conditions for there being "imaginings" in the mind—namely that the body is undergoing some affection—is permanently fulfilled, albeit in different degrees. In other words, Spinoza assumes that there is always a real cause for our imagining, which is why we are justified in believing that our ideas refer to something real, provided they are, in some way or another, about that cause. Spinoza thus commits himself, on the basis of his physiology, to some form of *minimal realism*. This realism corroborates something pointed out above, in our discussion of Spinoza's concept of ideas: that ideas always have a minimal epistemic value.⁴²

Now, it is rarely the case that the immediate cause leading to an idea's formation completely coincides with the object to which that idea refers—this happens only under the most auspicious of circumstances. Thus, it is one thing to say that a corporeal affection causes our imaginings and another thing entirely to maintain that such an affection is itself the intentional object of our ideas. The question, then, is how the aforementioned continuum of affective states to which our body is subjected is represented in our ideas. To tackle this

42. See Part II, Chapter 5, § b.

question, we must keep a few things in mind: that some ideas are necessarily involved in our experience of affections does not preclude that this experience is informed by other ideas, which may play a part in determining how we experience these affections. Indeed, my earlier interpretation of 2p12 does not require that this continuum of affective states is fully and wholly accurately depicted in the mind's consciousness; besides which, it is rather unlikely that there is such a thing as stream of consciousness in Spinoza.⁴³ Instead, we had better assume that this continuum of affective states manifests itself in a series of alternating yet discrete representations. In this context, it is important to note that Spinoza—in contrast to certain neurophysiological adaptations of his philosophy⁴⁴—assumes no causal connection between our perception of affections and the affections themselves. Thus, when the mind imagines, it certainly takes the body's affective state as a point of reference—but how precisely the ideas we form of some affection look is a matter of the influence that other ideas have on them. Even our ideas of our bodily affection are caused by other ideas, which is to say that their content is essentially determined by their relations to other ideas.

We must assume, then, that the perception of our body's affections is shaped by *discrete conceptual cuts*, whereas, on the physiological level, we merely encounter a continuity of changes. Phenomenologically speaking, this is quite plausible. Consider, for instance, how we sometimes feel after a heavy meal. We can be in a state of lethargy for quite a while and yet only notice this condition right before we fall asleep—even though the change in our general affective state occurred long before. This shows that we can discern states of affection and corresponding states of non-affection in our thoughts, despite there being no gap between such states on the level of our physiology. In a nutshell, the semantics of the concepts by which we describe our affections is, to some extent, independent of their physical counterparts; and while this is in accordance with Spinoza's views on the mind–body problem,⁴⁵ it has quite important implications for how we become aware of corporeal changes.

43. As we have seen, 2p12 does not simply maintain a universal psychosomatic parallelism. Instead, Spinoza assumes there that the extent to which someone can perceive the affections of his own body is fundamentally dependent on the particular idea he has of it. See Part III, Chapter 10, § c.

44. Damasio's concept of feeling, which is strongly aligned with Spinoza's conception of mind, presupposes such causality (2003, 85 ff.). For a critique of Damasio's reading of Spinoza, see Hacking 2004 and Hampe 2003. For a more extensive discussion of the similarities between Spinoza's theory of affects and neurophysiological theories of emotion and consciousness, also see Ravven 2004 and Mascarenhas 2004.

45. See Part II, Chapter 7.

2. There is yet another sense in which our ideas are autonomous with regard to the corporeal events underlying an act of imagination. In 2p17c, Spinoza tells us that, although “the external bodies by which the human body has once been affected neither exist nor are present, the mind will still be able to regard them as if they were present.”⁴⁶ He demonstrates this by referring, on the one hand, to postulate five of the digression, according to which the human body retains traces of affection on account of its complex design.⁴⁷ On the other hand, 2p17c of course relies on 2p17, where Spinoza discusses the implications of the notion of passive synthesis (put forward in 2p16c1) for our perception of singular things. Taking 2p17 and 2p17c together, we can say that Spinoza attributes a general tendency to presume the existence and presence of its objects to our sensibility. Because of this tendency, we always start out by regarding bodies as actually existing and present, unless our views are corrected by other ideas. Our minds cannot be prevented from positing a body’s presence and existence in the first place. This can be formulated as a general rule: according to Spinoza, our representations have the tendency to be conserved; that is, their contents remain the same until they are canceled out by other representations.

This *conservatism regarding the content of ideas* is crucial for the *Ethics* in a variety of ways. On account of this conservatism, the difference between perception and imagination reduces to a merely phenomenological distinction, for which no external or causal indicator can be provided and which is relatively insignificant for the epistemic value of the idea in question. One and the same representation can be identified as either a perception or an imagination, depending merely on the moment in time when the relevant affection has taken place and given rise to an idea. In fact, both are based on a real event, although in one of the two instances the event has happened in the past. Thus, both have the same positive core, which may in both cases lead to accurate insights, as long as the represented event is placed in the right temporal context. Furthermore, this conservatism also forms the theoretical basis for Spinoza’s epistemic determinism, discussed above in relation to the concept of idea. There, we saw that Spinoza interprets the fictional affirmation of nonexistent objects by invoking the notion of the deception

46. C I, 464; G II, 105.

47. “When a fluid part of the human body is determined by an external body so that it frequently thrusts against a soft part [of the body], it changes its surface and, as it were, impresses on [the soft part] certain traces of the external body striking against [the fluid part]” (C I, 462; G II, 102).

of a young boy, whose error consists in the mere lack of contrary convictions.⁴⁸ We now understand that this lack of contrary convictions is due to the boy's missing access to alternative experiences that would enable him to correct his presumption that the imagined object actually exists.

Looking at Spinoza's overall approach, this conservatism is likely a property not only of imaginative ideas but also of common notions, which, in the history of science, tend to be preserved. This is by no means a disadvantage, for if it were different, what would become of Spinoza's optimism regarding the mathematical sciences and their impact on human thought? This optimism would be quite ill-founded if we had to fear that adequate insights into the nature of things can be lost whenever their exact explanation currently eludes us.

3. A third point to be mentioned concerns the way in which our ideas of singular things are connected with each other, owing to their imaginary origins. As 2p18 explains, my representations of certain external objects are reactivated as soon as my mind recalls a third external body that had affected my own body together with the first.⁴⁹ We could label this Spinoza's *law of the association of ideas*; it contends that the idea of a body is associated with the idea of another body in such a way that thinking of the first will immediately evoke the notion of the other.⁵⁰ Spinoza justifies this law by saying that the body, upon being affected by several bodies at once, is now disposed in such a way that the idea of its affective state represents to the mind all involved bodies as present. Thus, one and the same affective state of my own body can give rise to several representations of several external bodies simultaneously.

These associations of ideas are crucial for the constitution of experiential content. According to 2p16c1, we perceive not just one but many bodies in conjunction with our own, which suggests that, compared with the isolated observation of singular things, associations of ideas are the default case rather than the exception. It is not surprising, then, that the better part of Spinoza's

48. See the fifth postulate of the physics, as quoted in the previous note.

49. "If the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also" (C I, 465; G II, 106).

50. In 2p18, Spinoza does not use the word "association" but rather "concatenation." This term is quite unspecific, however—Spinoza uses it to refer to connections of ideas made both by the imagination and by the understanding. Of course, when I speak of "association" below, I refer only to the first kind. We may wonder, however, why Spinoza's terminology is so ambiguous here. After all, he clearly distinguishes the two kinds of connection in terms of their origin.

psychology of cognition depends upon the law of the association of ideas. Associations are used to explain not only phenomena such as memory and the rise of language and signs but also different kinds of affect transfer.⁵¹

This, of course, relies on the assumption that associations of ideas behave just as conservatively as our ideas of singular things do. Associations of ideas, too, remain in place until some other presuppositions make it unlikely that two things belong together. This explains why biographical imprints or historically transmitted prejudices can exert such power over people's thoughts and experiences. Earlier, we outlined a mechanism due to which we immediately perceive external bodies as existing, whenever we perceive our own body as existing. In this mechanism, the subject is passively involved, and this is still the case with associations of ideas. And for this very reason, it is immensely important for Spinoza's practical philosophy that associations can be dissolved, whenever humans realize how contingent these associations are—an insight that at the same time both is liberating and amounts to an increase in one's activity.

Note that all three of these points—the autonomous semantics of our concepts by which we describe affective states, the conservatism with regard to the content of ideas, and the law of the association of ideas—are evidence of Spinoza's view that the conditions under which our ideas are formed have a decisive impact on their content. On the other hand, they also show Spinoza's efforts to give a proper account of this influence within his theory of imagination. What we owe to the process of imagination is not limited to the idiosyncratic cognitive structuring of the order of ideas in our mind; rather, imagination also gives rise to the forming of mental habits, and thus to traditions. Spinoza thus uses the very same theoretical concept to account for *both*: the contingent external influence of culture and history on our representations and the strict necessity of the cognitive-psychological laws governing the generation of mental content.

One thing must be emphasized, however: when Spinoza invokes the prospect of necessary psychological laws or mechanisms, he does not mean to say that subjects must be conscious of the involved processes. This is perfectly plausible. Clearly, any association guiding our thoughts can be made conscious, but associations usually operate on a subconscious level. Likewise, even though we may be mistaken about the origin of our ideas, we are still able to discover the causal mechanisms that shape them. Once we have made this discovery, we will be able to reflect on the origins of our representations and to reconstruct them in

51. For the latter point, also see § b of Chapter 13.

detail. Thus, even if we acknowledge that representations are sometimes formed in obscure and intricate ways, we are not forced to abandon the claim that experience can, in principle, be explained. On the contrary, if we assume that the processes involved in forming the contents of our mind are indeed independent of our conscious control, then it is actually *more* plausible to attribute to humans the desire to account for their own experiences, including the most subjective aspects thereof. How often we manage to succeed in this is another question entirely.

Emotions, or How to Explain Qualities of Experience

THE EMOTIONAL LIFE of humans is, in many respects, in need of explanation. To begin with, it is completely unclear what emotions really are or what it means that humans have feelings, are subject to moods, exhibit affects, etc.¹ In addition, a few questions come to mind which are concerned less with the phenomenon of human emotions in general but rather with the diversity and disparity of specific emotions. What is it that distinguishes different kinds of emotions? And why is it that in certain situations we feel jealousy rather than joy? From a more practical perspective, finally, we can inquire into the relationship between emotions, on the one hand, and moral and rational action, on the other. If emotions can motivate actions that are morally good, can they also justify such actions? Or is it not rather the case that morality is fundamentally independent of our subjective emotional experience? Do emotions exist that either support or impede rational action and understanding? And if so, are we dealing with an intrinsic or an extrinsic property of these specific emotions, or even of emotions in general?

The *Ethics* distinguishes itself from many other classic theories of the affects in that it addresses the entire range of questions outlined above. In his approach to these questions, Spinoza adopts a decidedly nonmoralist point of view.² His

1. For simplicity's sake, I will henceforth use the terms "emotions," "affects," and "feelings" interchangeably to refer to the entire range of emotional phenomena. This is not to deny that there exist many different kinds of emotional phenomena that may be of consequence for philosophical theory. In current approaches, for instance, emotions are often distinguished from moods and desires. Nevertheless, I cannot discuss here whether these distinctions make sense or what implications they have: interchangeability will suffice in the present context.

2. For instance, the theory of affects from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, while featuring a wealth of specifics for certain affects, does not give a general account of the concept of human emotions. Someone like Heidegger, on the other hand, does provide such a general account, emphasizing

motto is, “understand the emotions through their causes, rather than curse or laugh at them”—an attitude that forever eliminates the question of whether or not we are to blame for any particular feeling. Just like Descartes and Hobbes—but even more radically—Spinoza sets himself apart from many predecessors by maintaining that, rather than being viewed as the object of our practical efforts, the emotions should be the subject matter of theoretical considerations.³

This is not to rule out any and all ethical considerations. On the contrary, having demonstrated in Part Three how the affects are to be understood causally, Spinoza devotes Part Four to providing a practical evaluation of all sorts of individual affects. In this evaluation, he shows which affects can promote the prudent conduct of life and which constitute a hindrance. In Part Five, then, he argues how helpful it can be to spell out one’s emotional life theoretically, seeing that such an approach can serve to get rid of agonizing and confining emotions. Adopting this kind of approach, however, already eliminates one of the questions posed above: whenever the *Ethics* formulates moral judgments about certain emotions—for instance, that “hatred is always bad”⁴—this is not meant to refer to any intrinsic properties of emotions. It only means that emotions of this type are starkly antagonistic to that which rational and truth-loving subjects desire for themselves and others. In other words, emotions per se are neither rational nor irrational, neither moral nor immoral—they can be described as such only with regard to the impact they have on our lives. The crucial question, in other words, is whether some emotion helps us to acquire knowledge or prevents us from doing so.

Thus, despite the fact that Spinoza’s theory of affects lies at the center of his practical philosophy, it describes emotions as genuinely value-neutral: first and foremost, affects are to be understood—broadly speaking—as natural phenomena which are subject to the laws of nature. Yet, as shown by the previous sketch of Spinoza’s approach, two issues must be distinguished even from an amoral point of view. There is, on the one hand, the concern with the general conditions or overall structural aspects of human emotional life as a whole—let

the irreducible “attunement” (*Gestimmtheit*) of Dasein—but he tends to neglect the specific differences between kinds of emotions. Finally, Adam Smith, in his conception of sympathy, provides a detailed discussion of the relationship between morality and feelings, but he leaves unanswered many purely theoretical questions (see Smith 1974).

3. See the preface to Part Three of the *Ethics* (C I, 491–2; G II, 137–8). Wiehl 1996 and 2003 and Moreau 2003 emphasize the paradigm shift that comes about, in early modernity, with the rise of rationalist theories of emotions. For a more detailed account of Spinoza’s antirhetoric attitude, see also Renz 2005 and 2007.

4. Or, as 4p45 phrases it, “Hate can never be good” (C I, 571; G II, 243).

us call this “the ontology of the emotions.” And, on the other hand, there is the need to provide an explanation of the variety of kinds of emotions, or, more precisely, of *their* specific conditions. With regard to the latter, I shall also refer to the “semantics of emotions.”

The *Ethics* has something to say about both sets of questions. The first is addressed in the definition of “affect” and the discussion of the primary affects and the second in the attempt to derive the principles and laws needed for explaining a variety of secondary affects. In the following, I provide a rough sketch of Spinoza’s answers in their most important aspects. I first discuss the concepts of affect, *conatus*, and *conscientia* and ask what they contribute to the ontology of the affects (a). In a second step, I discuss the principles Spinoza uses to explain the variability of emotions within the realm of the secondary affects (b).

Overall, we will see that Spinoza’s theory of affects follows the same tendency as his theory of the imagination: the contingent factors that appear to determine the content of our thought are actually an expression of necessary mechanisms. Even in cases where our own ideas become a source of torment or reproach, Spinoza recognizes laws for which we are not responsible and to which we are simply subject, whether we like it or not. Nonetheless, we will see in the end that emotions can indeed be changed, be it culturally or individually. Even though the affects, for Spinoza, cannot be fully overcome, he makes a convincing case for our ability to cultivate and live an emotional life in such a way that we can live in friendship with others and be generous with ourselves.

a) On the Ontology of the Affects: What the Emotions Are, and Why We Have Them

To understand what Spinoza considers emotions to be and why he thinks it is the case that humans have emotions, we must consider the following points:

1. The *Ethics* fundamentally assumes that affects are phenomena that involve both dimensions of human existence—body and thought. This clearly follows from the definition of “affect” which is presented at the beginning of the theory of affects. “By affect,” Spinoza says in 3def3, “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.”⁵ Thus, by definition, affects always have two sides—a corporeal side and a mental side. In keeping with the identity theory of the mind outlined above, we can say that

5. C I, 493; G II, 139.

these two sides of human affectivity cannot be reduced to one another and that there is no causal interaction between them either.⁶ Spinoza emphasizes the latter point again, right at the beginning of his theory of affects, when, in 3p2, he tells us that “[t]he body cannot determine the mind to thinking, and the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else.”⁷ For his account of the emotions, this implies that explanations can generally operate in two semantic contexts: either we explain a person’s affects by inquiring into their physiological causes, or we focus on the thoughts someone has upon experiencing certain emotions. Both strategies are possible—they are not mutually exclusive since they focus on completely different aspects of human emotionality.

This kind of double-tracked approach is perfectly plausible. Linking emotions to hormonal or neurophysiological processes does not provide us with an explanation of their mental side. Conversely, putting the focus on their representational content or phenomenal experience says nothing about the physiological conditions of emotions. This point is not undermined by Spinoza’s cognitivism (as established in 2ax3). It is obvious from his theory of affects that this cognitivism too tells only half the story with respect to human emotional life. Apparently, Spinoza thinks that cognitivist descriptions are possible and meaningful when it comes to explaining the mental side of emotions. But to explain the phenomenon of human emotions adequately, cognitivist descriptions must be combined with an inquiry into the physiological roots of emotions.

Nonetheless, the *Ethics*’ primary concern is what an individual thinks when it has certain affects. Even though there are phenomena—such as cheerfulness or melancholy—for which the corporeal dimension is more significant than the mental dimension, Spinoza displays only a limited interest in the physiological conditions of the emotions. These phenomena, among others, are merely labeled but never subjected to further analysis. There are good reasons for this: shedding light on affects is itself a mental process, which entails—provided Spinoza’s identity theory—that the explanations themselves may have an impact on the mental dimension of affects. Apparently, rather than the provision of new medical treatments, Spinoza’s main interest is the mutual relationship between explanation (or comprehension) and experience. Notably, it is in virtue of this relationship that philosophical reflection has a practical

6. See Part II, Chapter 7.

7. C I, 494; G II, 141.

bearing. This indicates that the *Ethics* operates from a reflective-practical stance on emotions rather than from a medical or technical perspective.

2. Earlier, I quoted from 3def3, which mentions another constitutive element: by their very definition, affects are *transitional processes* which either increase or diminish an individual's power of acting. This is important for several reasons. First, it entails that God is, by definition, excluded from the circle of emotional beings. Spinoza clearly thinks that only finite things are capable of having affects and that having an emotion always has to do with a subject's finitude—or, more to the point, with its precarious existence.⁸ Second, this suggests that emotions are more than momentary states or feelings—they are relatively complex phenomena taking up a certain amount of time. In other words, emotions are more than just sensed states of affairs; they are, in fact, processes which cause a change in our emotional condition. To illustrate this, take the thought of how nice it would be to walk around Lake Zurich: this thought is an emotion in Spinoza's sense if and only if it goes hand in hand with an increase in my power or *potentia agendi*.⁹

There is a final implication, which is of crucial importance for the problem of the explainability of experience. Assuming that emotions are transitional processes, we can discern the reason certain mental states feel good or bad. When we experience something as pleasant or as unpleasant, we actually experience an increase or a reduction of our *potentia agendi*—which, according to Spinoza's description of the primary affects, joy and sadness, is equivalent to a transition from a higher to a lower degree of perfection.¹⁰ For Spinoza, therefore, the phenomenal quality of emotions is not a matter of qualia or of some basic, irreducibly *qualitative* feature of our mental states but is rather the expression of *quantitative* change which, as a general rule, can be spelled out more precisely. The oppressive feeling of being afraid, for example, has

8. For Spinoza's understanding of finitude, see also Part III, Chapter 9, § a. One could argue that Spinoza attributes to God at least one affect, namely an intellectual love for himself (see sp35). But as the proposition that follows, sp36, makes clear, this statement actually means something else: it is the human being who finds himself in a state of divine self-love. For the intellectual love of God, also see my Conclusion.

9. Handwerker Küchenhoff (2006, 33) also emphasizes that only finite subjects can have affects. Unlike her, however, I find it crucial to hold on to the difference between affection and affect. Affections are involved also when a thing maintains the status quo of its *potentia agendi*, whereas affects are not.

10. See 3p11s, C I, 501; G II, 148–9, as well as 4p8d, where Spinoza identifies our knowledge of good and bad with the affects of joy and sadness, C I, 550–1; G II, 215.

nothing to do with succumbing to an irreducible state of anxiety; it is merely a side effect of our seeing our *potentia agendi* diminished and drastically so.

Perhaps not all qualitative aspects of experience can be accounted for in this manner but only those that are related to the individual's *potentia agendi*. It remains unclear how Spinoza would account for those qualitative features of experience, such as secondary qualities, that are at the center of the debate about *qualia*. Yet, there is no harm for the *Ethics* in this, for within its proper project, experiential qualities are relevant only to the extent to which they are linked to an individual's *potentia agendi*.

3. For Spinoza's ontology of the emotions, it is important that all things are equipped with a *conatus*. This assumption is discussed in propositions 3p3–3p6, and 3p7 equates the *conatus* of a thing with its actual essence. Given that Spinoza develops this position at the beginning of Part Three, we can assume that he needs the concept of *conatus* for his theory of the emotions. But what exactly is the *conatus*, and how does the concept contribute to the explanation of emotions?

In 3p6, Spinoza defines the concept of *conatus* as follows:

Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.¹¹

In and by itself, this thesis carries little meaning. Only when considered in its specific context is it thrown into sharper relief.¹² In Spinoza scholarship two possible contexts tend to be invoked. On the one hand, Spinoza's *conatus* is often compared to the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis*. This notion stipulates that every living being harbors an affection for itself through which it is also compelled to seek to preserve itself and to maintain a constitution conducive to self-preservation.¹³ In early modern history, this theory was adopted and

11. C I, 498; G II, 146.

12. This is particularly important for the phrase *quantum in se est* as it appears in 3p6. Interpreted in the context of the Cartesian discussion of inertia, this phrase cannot possibly mean that a mode is “in itself,” a formulation Spinoza reserves for substantial being (see 1def3) (see, e.g., Kisser 2002, 217, and Lin 2004, 24–5). Instead, we must assume that only finite things have a *conatus*. This follows from 3p4, which states that things can be destroyed only through an external cause—which implies that self-preservation is a problem only for things that are finite (see Schrader 1977, 576). That Spinoza operates in a specific context should also serve as a caution for those trying to understand the meaning of the proposition from its derivation alone. This is the case with Naess 1975 and—less exclusively—with Della Rocca 1996b.

13. Looking for points of reference, scholars usually refer to either Diogenes Laertius, *De vitis* VII, 85 (see Pollock 1880, 132; Dilthey 1921, 286; and—following Dilthey—Bittner 2002, 209) or to Cicero's presentation of the same doctrine in *De finibus* (see Curley 1988, 114, and—following him—Cook 2011, 152).

developed further by philosophers such as Ludovico Vives, Bernardino Telesio, Giordano Bruno, and Justus Lipsius.¹⁴ On the other hand, the passage cited above is often interpreted against the backdrop of the Cartesian principle of inertia.¹⁵ Spinoza himself discusses this principle in the DPP,¹⁶ and, in his sketch of a physical theory, he even derives it from the first axioms and propositions.¹⁷ Yet, his theory of affects does not explicitly mention his physics.

Spinoza was certainly familiar with the discussion surrounding both Stoic *oikeiosis* and Cartesian inertia, and we can assume that both ultimately served as inspirations for his concept of *conatus*.¹⁸ The decisive question, however, is how an equally informed reader benefits from placing the thesis expressed in 3p6 into either one of these two contexts. Here, we must start with the fact that the wording of 3p6 itself comes very close to the terminology used in the discussion of the concept of inertia in seventeenth-century physics. This becomes perfectly clear if, instead of relying simply on Descartes' own remarks,¹⁹ we turn our attention to the treatment of the topic in Dutch Cartesianism. For instance, Spinoza's wording in 3p6 is largely congruous with Clauberg's in his physics, when he describes Descartes' law of the conservation of motion.²⁰ It is not only that they both employ variations on the apparently habitual phrase *unaquaeque res quantum in se est*. In addition, Clauberg uses the verb "to persevere," *perseverare*,

14. See especially Blumenberg 1996, 155–65. Dilthey 1921, 289, in particular has drawn our attention to Telesio's influence on Spinoza.

15. Walther 1971, 102; Curley 1988, 107–8; and Della Rocca 1996b, 196–7.

16. See proposition 14 in the second part of the DPP: "Each thing, insofar as it is simple, undivided, and considered in itself alone, always perseveres in the same state as far as it can" (C I, 277; G I, 201).

17. See 2p13sLem3c: "From this it follows that a body in motion moves until it is determined by another body to rest; and that a body at rest also remains at rest until it is determined to motion by another" (C I, 459; G II, 98).

18. While Bittner (2002, 208) insists that the Stoic *oikeiosis* is the only source for Spinoza's *conatus*, I agree with Blumenberg (1996, 157), who says that the Stoic background is insufficient to explain the strict and general nature of Spinoza's *conatus*. This is not to say that Bittner is wrong when he claims that the *conatus* is crucial for explaining why self-relations persist. But to support his thesis, he strictly opposes ontological interpretations of this concept, and this opposition is misplaced.

19. See the first law of nature from the second book of the *Principles of Philosophy*: "The first law of nature: each and every thing, in so far as it can, always continues in the same state; and thus what is once in motion always continues to move" (CSM I, 240; AT VIII, 62).

20. "First law of nature: that each simple and indivisible thing, as far as it is in its power, always remains in the same state, nor is it ever changed except through an external cause" ("Prima lex naturae: quod unaquaeque res quantum in se est, semper in eodem statu perseveret; sicque quod semel movetur, semper moveri pergar"), Clauberg 1968 (1691), I, 102.

rather than “to remain,” *manere*; and Spinoza does the same in both 3p6 and the PPC. Thus, they both prefer a different verb from Descartes himself—a verb, incidentally, that Newton will later employ in a similar context.²¹

Yet, there are two ways in which Spinoza’s definition in 3p6 departs from this model as provided by Clauberg’s rendering of the Cartesian concept of inertia. First, employing the term *conari*, Spinoza introduces a dynamic, seemingly voluntary aspect that is missing in the principle of inertia. This aspect, which on occasion suggests why the *conatus* plays a role in the theory of affects in the first place, probably has its origin in the concept of *oikeiosis*.²² Second, but no less importantly, 3p6 deviates from the principle of inertia by stating that objects strive to persevere in their *being* (*in suo esse*), rather than their current state (*in eodem statu*), as Clauberg has it. Thus, we are not simply dealing with bodies and their states of motion—nor, as a biological reading might suggest, with organic systems and their homeostasis.²³ In fact, we are dealing with things, *res*, and their being. Spinoza thus considers the *conatus* to be a general ontological principle that regulates the relationship between objects and their own being.

But what does this mean in detail? It is instructive, in this context, to realize the precise role the concept of *conatus* plays for the discussion of concrete problems. Spinoza’s *conatus* is crucial for deciding which questions need to be addressed in the first place. In this sense, it is motivated by the same strategy that gave rise to the principle of inertia: if it is understood that bodies persevere in their state of motion, it is no longer necessary to explain why motions are continuous. Similarly, if things and their states generally strive to remain as they are, we no longer need to explain *why* they remain as they are.²⁴

In my view, this is also the point behind identifying a thing’s *conatus* with its actual essence, as Spinoza does in 3p7: each thing is determined, by its ontological constitution, to persevere in its current state. In the case of living beings, this means that they seek to stay alive. In the case of moving bodies, however, it means that they continue their motion. Finally, if the thing is an individual mind, it can mean that it strives to retain a certain arrangement of its thoughts.²⁵

21. For the historical background of the term *perseverare*, which, in the seventeenth century starts to compete with the originally theological term *conservare*, see Blumenberg 1996.

22. See, e.g., Cicero, 2001, 69–70.

23. This is how Cook 2011, 158, reads the *conatus*, following Jonas 1965. Jonas himself, however, does not refer to the *conatus*.

24. This is why Blumenberg has aptly referred to the *conatus* as a “principle in the service of eliminating questions” (in German, *Ausschliessungsprinzip von Fragen*) (1996, 188).

25. This is precisely how 3p9 employs the *conatus* principle—not as a tendency toward a *beneficial* order but as a preservation of an *existing* order.

We can easily now discern which function the concept of *conatus* has for the theory of the emotions. It primarily explains why individuals are inclined to have certain affects. But this is not to say that all emotions come from a drive to self-preservation; it rather explains why emotional imprints are retained, even if they are inherently meaningless and without purpose. A person conditioned to feel anxiety before other people will always be inclined to feel anxiety before other people, despite the experience that anxiety is a very unpleasant feeling, which it would be far more pleasant not to have.

Thus, the *conatus* explains the fundamental direction of our emotional striving by positing it as a perpetual tendency that has become part of a thing's essence. And this tendency is also what Spinoza equates with the first of the three primary affects, desire, or *cupiditas*, and not some alleged naked impulse to survive. Whatever a person's desires are directed toward, this directedness is what ultimately determines the fundamental dynamic of her emotional life.²⁶ For humans, this of course includes the impulse to keep on living since life belongs to the essence of living beings. But, at the same time, many other things may be included as well, some of which may actually run counter to the need of staying alive. For instance, the *conatus* can explain why an addict feels compelled to satisfy his urges while knowing quite well that he is harming himself.

4. Finally, we must look at another concept that is introduced in the definition of the primary affects and that is of significance for the ontology of the emotions: the concept of *conscientia*, or "consciousness." Desire (*cupiditas*) which 2p9s identifies with the first primary affect, is not simply defined as a thing's *conatus* but as *conatus* plus *conscientia*. In much the same way, the other two primary affects—joy and sadness—are always accompanied by "consciousness." Apparently, *conscientia* is an essential trait of subjects of emotions. But what exactly does this mean?

There are two major points to note here. First, the original meaning of the Latin *conscientia* was "conscience," rather than "consciousness," and this meaning was active through the seventeenth century.²⁷ In Descartes, for instance, this sense of the word still plays an important role.²⁸ Granted, when

26. See 3p9s, C I, 500; G II, 147.

27. See Balibar's 1998 book about Locke, especially his introduction. His interpretation of Spinoza's *conscientia* (Balibar 1992) differs from my own in several respects. For the history of the concept of consciousness and for problems arising from this history for the question of self-consciousness, see Tugendhat 1979, 31–2.

28. Even Descartes, who is often lauded as the inaugurator of the philosophy of consciousness, uses this term in a way that is structurally reminiscent of the old concept of conscience. This has been shown by Hennig 2006, but see also Thiel 2013, who refutes this view in many places.

Spinoza uses the term *conscientia*, he no longer refers to an intimate knowledge that allows me to assess the moral quality of my own actions and motivations—but neither does he simply talk about a neutral mapping of my own mental processes. What the term really seems to signify is a qualitatively featured awareness by which the emotional quality of experiencing of some mental state or action is registered. At least, whenever Spinoza talks of our being *conscious* of our own mental states, what he is referring to is an instance of our awareness of some *affect*. And it is precisely because of this—that for Spinoza *conscientia* reflects the emotional quality of experiencing certain mental states—that *conscientia* can also figure as a source for our original notions of good and bad. That it is the emotions that we are conscious of, then, is a crucial cornerstone in Spinoza's attempt to establish a moral philosophy that is grounded in anthropology.

There is a second implication of the claim that our emotions are accompanied by *conscientia*: it further limits the circle of things capable of having emotions in the first place. The main reason this needs to be emphasized is that it counters the general ontological assumption that all singular things have a *conatus*. While all things have the tendency to persevere in their being, emotions are limited to beings that are conscious of this tendency. This is not to say that Spinoza adheres to an intellectualist view of the emotions, which would maintain that emotions always presuppose *knowledge* of certain things or values. It is definitely not the case that for Spinoza having a desire requires knowledge of what is good (for us); on the contrary, 3p9s makes it perfectly clear that it works the other way around for him: “we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it.”²⁹ Still, it is a necessary condition for this that we are aware of our desire.

In all, these points show that Spinoza considers human emotions to be both necessary and modifiable. In a highly complex fashion, Spinoza combines a determinism based on claims about the nature of emotions with a fundamentally antiessentialist tendency. To have emotions is an essential trait of humans, who are finite beings equipped with both a *conatus* and *conscientia*. And this is connected, as might easily be shown, to the assumption that humans have notions of good and evil. Moreover, it is quite clear that the emotions of humans can be neither purely pleasant nor purely unpleasant. But, all this aside, it remains undetermined precisely *what kinds* of emotions a person has, or tends to have—and, by

29. “From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it” (C I, 500; G II, 148).

extension, what kinds of things she considers to be good or evil. Once we get to the explanation of the principles underlying Spinoza's definition of the secondary affects, we will see that this is a matter of how the emotional lives of individuals and particular groups are determined historically, by culture and biography.

*b) Affects and Their Histories: The Genetic
Reconstruction of the Secondary Affects*

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza differentiates between more than fifty discrete affects. Forty-eight of them are listed at the end of Part Three, in a catalog of definitions. This catalog not only includes phenomena such as compassion, anger, and hatred—which today would clearly be considered examples of emotions—but also personality traits such as cruelty, boldness, and ambition, along with vices such as drunkenness, avarice, and lustfulness. In addition, the explications to some of these definitions mention virtues such as mercy, moderation, and chastity. Spinoza apparently assumes that the field of emotional phenomena is characterized by an enormous variety. But the question is: what kind of significance does he assign to this variety, and to what extent does he think it can be explained?

Two things are important to note here. First, it must be emphasized that the terminological distinctions at the root of this variety are by no means Spinoza's inventions. On the contrary, as Stephen Voss has shown, both the names and, roughly, the sequence of presentation are the same as in the Latin translation of Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*, which appeared in 1650.³⁰ Thus, the *Ethics* takes an already existing catalog of emotion terms and shows how the underlying distinctions can be reconciled with its own set of principles. Spinoza's cartography of human emotional life is an astute appropriation and reworking of existing distinctions; it does not result from an original, independent inquiry.³¹ We can also assume that this is why some definitions of affects appear to be phenomenologically suspect at first glance.

This leads us to the second—often neglected—point: in his theory of affects, Spinoza repeatedly cautions that the names given to the affects must not be

30. Voss 1981, 167, makes the point that the translation made not insubstantial alterations in its representation of the original French and that Descartes, who died in February 1650, would not have been able to check its accuracy and authorize it, as he did for translations of earlier works.

31. In another publication, I have argued that the *enumeratio* of the affects at the end of Part Three merely serves to verify, in retrospect, that Spinoza's psychology is suitable for addressing the range of phenomena that were standardly associated with the subject at the time. See Renz 2005, 345.

confused with the phenomena themselves. This becomes clear from a brief post-script to the explanation of his definition of shame. Here, Spinoza tells us that “the names of the affects are guided more by usage than by nature.”³² Apparently, Spinoza considers the nomenclature of the affects—and, by extension, their variety—to be a secondary phenomenon, leaving only the three primary affects—desire, sadness, and joy—as original, mutually irreducible phenomena. This confirms what was stated earlier: for Spinoza, it seems to be inevitable that humans have emotions—but what precisely they feel depends not on the ontology of the affects but rather on contingent factors. These factors can be cultural, historical, semantic, and, of course, biographical.

Yet, even secondary phenomena may call for an explanation. Even though affects such as shame and compassion are derivative phenomena, it by no means follows that they are less real and that they present no difficulties that should be taken seriously. The question, therefore, is how this variety of emotions comes about at all, if emotions are nothing but secondary phenomena.

Spinoza addresses this question by analyzing a wide range of affects, which involves looking at their geneses—or, more precisely, the geneses of their specific and singular contents. Thus, at least as far as the secondary affects are concerned, Spinoza’s psychology of the emotions relies, fundamentally, on his theory of the imagination. Earlier, we discussed the principles underlying the generation of content; now we can say that these very principles are an important basis for the explanation of different affects. In his theory of affects, Spinoza further develops this approach by exposing how the ideas that, by definition, accompany our affects are specified and diversified by their semantic relationships to other ideas. Roughly speaking, secondary affects owe their existence to the fact that primary affects are contextualized—and thus interpreted, so to speak. This leads to the important question of how such processes of contextualization can themselves be described and understood.

In his theory of affects, Spinoza mentions a number of principles and mechanisms that give us a hint as to how these kinds of processes can be explained. At this point, I shall only comment on the most important.³³

32. C I, 538; G II, 199.

33. Since the *Ethics* does not label each and every law, it is disputable what exactly needs to be distinguished when reconstructing Spinoza’s affect factory. My goal here is merely to unveil the principles underlying Spinoza’s approach, by focusing on the most important mechanisms. Thus, my description makes no claim to be exhaustive. For instance, I have omitted mechanisms involving the temporality of certain affects (3p18 and 3p50), as well as those referring to a reciprocity of feelings (3p33). For the latter, see also Moreau 2011, 185–7.

1. As we pointed out in the previous section, emotions are by definition experienced as value-laden—that is, they are either positive or negative for the subject's *potentia agendi*. They are either a striving for something that increases the *potentia agendi*, or they are themselves the transition to a greater or lesser *potentia agendi*. Now, humans are prone to attribute such transitions that they experience as value-laden to specific causes, rather than simply accepting them; and they tend to seek these causes outside of themselves. We could also say that humans are naturally inclined to attribute causes to events. They have, in short, *a tendency for causal attribution*. According to Spinoza, the first basic secondary affects—love and hatred—result from such instances of causal attribution; they are described, respectively, as “a joy, accompanied by the idea of an external cause” and as “a sadness, accompanied by the idea of an external cause.”³⁴

These two affects hold a special place in Spinoza's derivation of the secondary affects: identified as derivative themselves, they nonetheless form the basis for many secondary affects, from envy to anger to pride. Spinoza apparently thinks that causal attributions of this kind play an extremely important role in our emotional life: they influence a great many emotions in one way or another and are even responsible for the existence of many emotional phenomena. To borrow a term from present-day theories of emotion, we could also say that their function goes a long way toward explaining how emotional “bootstrapping” works: our emotional reaction to things is crucially determined by the causal role we assign to them regarding our well- or ill-being.³⁵ Conversely, we will always assign to them the causal role most suited to filling the gaps in our system of rationalizations.

As far as the formation of these affects is concerned, it is irrelevant whether our attributions are accurate or not. Granted, most of our causal attributions will be based on inadequate ideas—indeed, in the case of hatred, they will *never* be adequate, according to Spinoza. But purely in psychological terms, attributions based on actual knowledge are prompted by the same mechanisms as those attributions based on false representations. This means that even the love of God is not genuinely different from our love of objects, people, or circumstances, insofar as we realize that these things are good for us—really and sustainably good for us, for our being as a whole. It is for these reasons that what Spinoza calls “love of God” arises only once we are fully able to explain our affections, comprehend their sources, and affirm them as necessary. Thus,

34. C I, 502; G II, 151. For the relationship between an affect's cause and its object, see also Birnbacher 1998.

35. See De Sousa 1990, 36.

it is one and the same principle that gives rise to particular affects and that keeps them alive, while also granting us the ability to overcome these affects emotionally, by gaining full knowledge of their causal determination.

2. Causal attributions often go together with a mechanism we described earlier, in connection with the genesis of imaginary ideas: the mechanism of association. We said that ideas are often linked by associative connections: if, sometime in the past, someone's body has simultaneously been affected by two different external bodies, then the ideas of those two bodies are associated with each other in such a way that thinking of the first body will immediately evoke the notion of the other. In his theory of affects, Spinoza radicalizes this assumption by suggesting that similar associative connections may be established not only between the representations of the two bodies but also between two affects. Consequently, emotions associated in this way are evoked together just as surely and immediately as two representations that are linked by association are evoked together.³⁶

It is clear how a theory of affects increases its explanatory power by making a case for such a necessary *affect association*. Consider, for instance, emotions that strike us as ambivalent or even contradictory or that are engendered through the use of rhetoric—such phenomena can be explained through being attributed to this mechanism, which strips them of their absurdity. For Spinoza, this mechanism is crucial because it allows him to account for the historical or biographical contingency by which certain things become the objects of specific affects. Ultimately, it is this mechanism of affect association that explains how we come to love or hate things that are not the cause of our joy or sadness. This includes things that by our own admission cannot possibly instill us with these feelings, even though we would say that—without any real reason—we “somehow” find them congenial or disagreeable.³⁷

This confirms something we saw earlier, while discussing Spinoza's treatment of imagination: to give a theoretical explanation of mental phenomena, we must acknowledge that our thoughts and feelings are subject to contingent influences. With regard to the emotions, this is of enormous value: in Part Five, Spinoza dedicates several propositions to showing that ideas which have been linked by association can be separated and attributed to different causes, which destroys any affects that had been generated by the

36. See 3p14: “If the mind has once been affected by two affects at once, then afterwards, when it is affected by one of them, it will also be affected by the other” (C I, 502; G II, 151).

37. See especially 3p15, where Spinoza concludes from 3p14 that “[a]ny thing can be the accidental cause of joy, sadness, or desire” (C I, 503; G II, 151). In 3p15c and 3p15s, Spinoza uses this proposition to explain love (or sympathy and antipathy) by way of association.

association.³⁸ Thus, by understanding the laws governing the genesis of affects, we are not simply accepting our fate; we can also liberate ourselves from that fate—if not completely, then at least from some of its aspects.

3. Many affects cannot fully be explained by the law of association, even though associations are undoubtedly involved in their creation. How is it, for instance, that we despise someone who has caused us no harm and whose actions are perfectly inoffensive to us? Or how are we to understand that people hate an entire ethnicity, despite only knowing a few of its members? To explain these kinds of phenomena, Spinoza comes up with another mechanism which I shall call *transfer of affects based on similarity*. 3p16 describes this mechanism in its simplest form:

From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have some likeness to an object which usually affects the mind with joy or sadness, we love it or hate it, even though that in which the thing is like the object is not the efficient cause of these affects.³⁹

What is the purpose of this mechanism? It explains why associations of affects occur even in cases of mere similarity—and, what is more, cases in which we actually know that there is no causal connection between an imagined individual and whatever this imagination triggers in us. In other words, we are dealing with a projection based on similarity and not with a confusion of affect-laden objects. Now, what counts as similar is subject to almost no rules at all. In fact, by emphasizing that we can come to love or hate something out of the *mere* idea (*[e]x eo solo*) of its having some likeness with another loved or hated thing, Spinoza explicitly precludes that there is a content-based criterion that would tell us exactly when imagined similarities are capable of affecting our attitude toward certain objects. Similarity—including merely conjectured similarity—is sufficient for generating affects. Note that, just like the notion of affect association, the assumption of such affect transfer has an enormous explanatory import. It accounts in particular for all those affects that are not directed at a singular, precisely determined object but rather at entire classes of things. It explains, in other words, how it comes about that

38. See especially 5p2: “If we separate emotions, *or* affects, from the thought of an external cause, and join them to other thoughts, then the love, *or* hate, toward the external cause is destroyed, as are the vacillations of mind arising from these affects” (C I, 597; G II, 281).

39. C I, 503; G II, 152–3. In this context, Hampe 2004, 239, aptly refers to a “deconditioning.”

affects can be based on wholly vague representations—as happens in cases of social prejudice or of phenomena such as anticipated joy and nostalgia.

4. As a complement to this mechanism of affect transfer, Spinoza posits another mechanism, which he calls *imitation of affects*. In 3p27, he describes it as follows:

If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect.⁴⁰

This mechanism explains why certain representations are sufficient to cause feelings in a particular subject, even though the subject's body has not itself been affected. Remarkably, the insight that this is an anthropological possibility has been around since antiquity, when, in the context of the study of rhetoric, it gave rise to the earliest philosophical discussion of the affects. Yet, the classical rhetorical approaches failed to provide a theoretical underpinning for this assumption. In 3p27, though, Spinoza remedies this situation by pointing out that nothing more than the idea of some similarity between ourselves and other subjects is needed for us to be seized by the same emotion we imagine others to have.⁴¹

Note that, once again, similarity is the crucial factor here.⁴² Yet, there is a difference from the aforementioned transfer of affects: what is at the root of some transfer of affect is the subject's presupposition that the causes of affection are similar to one another. In cases of *affect imitation*, however, the similarity exists between the subject of an idea and some other individual whom the subject imagines to have certain emotions. Together, these two laws highlight the tremendous power that ideas have over emotions: if I run into someone today who seems to bear even a slight resemblance to some crook I have met in the past, then this idea alone is sufficient to fill me with hatred—even though the supposed similarity may have nothing to do with the trait that caused me harm in the past.

This last point is crucial for Spinoza's entire theory of affects: if mere imagination is capable of generating affects, then we must assume that the concrete shape and form of the emotional life of a person depend on powerful cultural or etymological influences—despite the affects themselves being natural phenomena with

40. C I, 508; G II, 160.

41. See also Renz 2005 and 2007.

42. See also Moreau 2011, 183.

an irreducible corporeal dimension. In other words, Spinoza's theory of affects takes into account the historicity of our experience—even more so, in fact, than his theory of the imagination does. Providing an explanation of the historicity of human experience lends considerable support to the rationalist demand to show that experience is intelligible, even in its historical forms.

Yet, that affects can be caused by imaginative ideas alone does not imply that what we actually feel is simply a matter of fantasy. Just like ideas, affects are generated with mechanical necessity, so to speak. Thus, they elude the subject's control—and quite often the subject's awareness. While, according to Spinoza, our emotions largely depend on our own projections, getting rid of these projections is not simply a question of will. We cannot simply wish these projections away. At most, we can seek to understand where exactly they come from and thereby defuse them.

Later, we will take a closer look at the epistemological requirements for such therapeutic reflection. But here we have the first indication of why the task of explaining experience—including its historical-genetic dimension—has ethical relevance: one can overcome one's negative emotions, such as hatred, and can support others in doing the same, through coming to understand where exactly these emotions come from.

Epistemology

THE POSSIBILITY OF PRODUCING SUCCESSFUL EXPLANATIONS

AS THE LAST two chapters have shown, Spinoza believes that subjective experiences are intelligible, right down to the constitution of their content and their experiential quality. We have seen, in particular, that his theory of the imagination does more than just spell out how subjects cognitively process events in which they are involved. Considering, in addition, how Spinoza's cognitive psychological views are further developed in his treatment of the affects, we are now in a position to reconstruct why a person experiences certain events in the way that he or she does. Thus, the main, or ontological, part of the inquiry here—that is, to show why, or due to which theoretical considerations, Spinoza can assume that experience is explicable—is thereby concluded.

Yet, merely to be convinced that experience can be explained is not, in itself, practically relevant; only the successful explanation of concrete experiences can claim this privilege. Our next task, therefore, is to discuss which epistemic means we, as humans, actually have available for the elucidation of concrete instances of subjective experiences. Moreover, there is the evaluative question of the normative concepts or criteria we possess that allow us to decide whether or not an explanation can be regarded as successful. To address these questions, we need an epistemology—otherwise, the ontological thesis of Spinoza's theory of mind, that subjective experience is explainable, will remain suspended in thin air, that is, reduced to the status of mere conceivability. For the most part, Spinoza tackles these epistemological problems in the second half of Part Two of the *Ethics*, where, after having analyzed different sets of ideas on the basis of their cognitive-psychological constitution, he goes on to assess and classify them with regard to their epistemic value. As it turns

out, the main result is not to be reduced to a mere abstract epistemological classification of ideas. Instead, I argue, Spinoza tries to demonstrate here that humans, despite their initial lack of adequate knowledge, are, generally speaking, able to improve the epistemological balance of their thoughts and thus to get a better grasp of the causes of their experiences. Such improvement not only may further our understanding of past subjective experiences; it also creates a different epistemic starting point for perceiving future affections. In the end, therefore, our insights into the constitution of experience will result in a change of the very content of our experiences, which is, I think, a major point on Spinoza's epistemological agenda.

Thus, Spinoza's epistemology does not simply elucidate the concepts, sources, and possibility of human knowledge; it also, albeit indirectly, has the aim of improving the epistemological balance of our ideas by advancing our understanding of subjective experience. It seeks to successively account for all the processes and causal connections that have an impact on, shape, or even cause our subjective perception and experience. But since these processes and connections can variously be of a general or ontological nature, be type-specific, or even be individual and idiosyncratic, Spinoza's epistemology must promote a differentiated view when it comes to the possibilities of human understanding. It is not sufficient to argue that humans can *in principle* attain genuine knowledge of their subjective experiences; the real question is what kind of conceptual—or, more generally speaking, epistemic—means they have at their disposal to do so.

In the following, I explore this a little further by discussing a number of selected theses and theorems from Spinoza's epistemology. First, I discuss what kind of normative assumptions are at play in his concepts of truth and adequacy, as well as the claim that the ideal of a genuine and adequate knowledge can gradually be approximated. We will see that Spinoza's use of these concepts introduces the vision of an epistemic perfectionism, a perfectionism that is characterized not only by the postulate of an ideal destination but also by the supposed possibility of a gradual approximation. Thus, the option of an accumulative improvement of our knowledge gains a conceptual basis, as it were (a). In a second step, we must ask ourselves how Spinoza anchors his belief that, as epistemic subjects, we can actually have a reflexive attitude toward our ideas. This possibility is a decisive requirement for Spinoza's epistemic perfectionism: only if I can reflect on my current ideas about things can I notice inconsistencies and distance myself from inadequate ideas. Moreover, in discussing the notion of *idea ideae*, which is crucial for his concept of reflection, we will also learn more about how we are to think of the transformation of experiential content through

knowledge, according to Spinoza (b). Following up on this, I shall take a look at the concept of the common notions. Accounting for the possibility of knowledge of general—ontological as well as type-specific properties, the concept of common notions serves as the theoretical underpinning for the human capacity to gain adequate knowledge of superindividual properties of things. Note, however, that the concept of common notions is important for Spinoza not only because it allows for the possibility of a general and systematically produced knowledge. Moreover—and this is essential here—it is due to the common notions that we humans get into the position of being able to gain some distance from the vague and inadequate imaginative views we hold about ourselves and our experiences. This is because, in forming common notions, we necessarily gain an adequate knowledge of at least some aspects of our being and experience (c). Next, I discuss the ideal of a complete adequate knowledge of singular things, which is the gist of Spinoza's concept of intuitive knowledge. As we will see, this concept is crucial for Spinoza's rationalism; were the notion of some knowledge of the ultimate determination of singular things an improbable suggestion, then it would no longer make sense to maintain a complete intelligibility of being. We may ask how knowledge of this kind is to be conceived concretely. I argue that intuitive knowledge, *scientia intuitiva* for Spinoza, is a different *type* of knowledge only in the sense that it allows us to *arrive* at the end of our quest for knowledge with regard to particular objects. Yet, intuitive knowledge is not achieved by humans in any other way than by the successive formation of increasingly fine-meshed common notions. This is why Spinoza can insist on the human capacity for intuitive knowledge, even when it comes to intuitively knowing such complex things as one's own mind and experiences. Therefore, to realize the ideal that motivates Spinoza's epistemology, we do not require an omniscient subject, or God, but "merely" the permanent, infinite epistemic efforts that humans are capable of (d). Finally, I give a brief summary of what it means for explanations of subjective experience to be successful and what their success depends on (e).

Overall, it will become clear that Spinoza's epistemological concepts largely follow the program of his realist rationalism. The goal is to make plausible that the promise of a complete intelligibility of being leads to epistemic possibilities that can be realized step by step. However, when it comes to the ideal of a complete adequate knowledge of singular things, this claim may be considered with a certain reservation. This concern can be mitigated, though, by pointing out that Spinoza considers it a rare and difficult feat to attain complete knowledge—especially of complex things. Apparently, it is not his intention to deny the difficulties and to turn what is rare into an ordinary occurrence; he only wants

to show that the goal is a meaningful one and one certainly worth attempting to reach, even if we may never actually do so.

*a) Truth, Adequacy, and the Spectrum
of Inadequate Knowledge: The Conceptual Basis
of Spinoza's Epistemic Perfectionism*

Ascriptions of knowledge usually entail an implicit normative statement. When we say of someone that he knows something, we are not simply referring to some act of cognition that he has processed; we also assume that his views on the object or fact in question meet certain standards and that meeting these standards is what justifies the application of the term "knowledge." But the criteria underlying our use of the term "knowledge" are rarely articulated; we often have only an unclear idea of the implicit standards that decide whether we consider a person's thoughts as cases of knowledge. Furthermore, requirements may depend on context: the criteria for the discussion of the causes of climate change in a scientific context are one thing, while the criteria by which we might accuse a denier of climate change of bias are quite another. Even though different criteria are involved, when we are talking about knowledge of the causes of climate change in these contexts, our assessment is not purely descriptive but contains an implicit evaluation in both cases.

Spinoza does not stray from this practice. Granted, in his theory of the imagination, he develops a view of human perception that is largely cognitive-psychological in nature, and, later, this also grounds his epistemological assessment that all imaginative ideas provide only an inadequate knowledge of their objects.¹ On the other hand, Spinoza clearly distinguishes between descriptive and normative perspectives that we may adopt with respect to our ideas. He, for instance, does not use the terms "adequate" and "inadequate" knowledge before 2p25—and once he employs them, he does so precisely in the context of evaluating some idea we actually have with regard to its epistemic value. In addition, the conceptual premises of his evaluative terminology are neither taken from his psychology nor justified in a purely pragmatic way. Spinoza is sometimes

1. Two passages express Spinoza's view that all knowledge based on imaginative ideas is inadequate: the definition of the first species of knowledge in 2p4os2 (C I, 477; G II, 122) and the argument made in 2p41, which recapitulates this definition (C I, 488; G II, 123). For the relationship between Spinoza's theory of the imagination and his classification of different kinds of knowledge, see also Part IV, Chapter 12, § a. In § b, we made clear that Spinoza's account of imagination is more than just a psychology of cognition. This follows from the use he makes of 1ax4 in the proof to 2p16.

accused of conflating two kinds of problems, namely those concerning the genesis of cognition and those dealing with the validity of knowledge—yet, these accusations are clearly not warranted.² On the contrary, Spinoza is for the most part very conscientious with respect to this distinction. And even though he sometimes draws connections between genetic aspects and issues of validity in particular cases—connections one may find debatable—his theory of knowledge is definitely not a naturalized epistemology.³

But things get more complicated once we ask what particular normative commitments Spinoza's epistemology actually relies on. As with so many other things, Spinoza does not make this explicit. Rather, important notions are simply entailed in the way in which certain concepts are introduced, related to others, and employed. So this is just another case in which quite crucial assumptions of his approach can only be ascertained in an indirect manner. The following points are particularly illuminating.

1. An important premise for Spinoza's entire epistemology is articulated in 1ax6, which postulates that "a true idea must agree with its object," that is, with the thing of which it is the idea.⁴ The question is how this "must" is to be understood.⁵ To answer this question, it makes sense to point to two observations. First, Spinoza apparently advocates a correspondence theory of truth—after all, he requires an agreement between an idea and an object of knowledge. What is striking, however, is that he never even discusses the issue.⁶ In the entire first part of the *Ethics*, we are left to wonder exactly what kind of agreement we are dealing with. And in Part Two we are told only *under which circumstances* ideas are true and why we notice them to be true in concrete instances. But we are left in the dark as to what *truth* actually means. In 1ax6, Spinoza thus explicitly commits himself to a concept of

2. For this accusation, see Martineau 1882, 138, as well as Barker 1972, 141 ff.

3. Independent of our current agenda, this problem is discussed in more detail in Renz 2009a.

4. C I, 410; G II, 47. Spinoza uses the term *ideatum* to refer to the thing itself, not just to the thing as it occurs in our thoughts; see also Walther 1971, 139–40.

5. Gueroult (1968, 103–4) differentiates between two possible readings of this "must" (*debet*). It could indicate a theoretical necessity, meaning that it lies in the nature of true ideas to agree with their object. Or, he says, it could indicate an imperative, something that human knowledge has to achieve. Neither of these possibilities strikes me as plausible. If it were a necessity imposed by the nature of truth, Spinoza would rather use the term *necessario*. On the other hand, there is no indication that this *debet* is directed, as an implicit imperative, to knowledge-seeking subjects. For an alternative reading, see the main text.

6. Hampshire 1994 and Schmid 2008 share this view. For a different opinion, see Ellsiepen 2011, 130.

truth based on correspondence, yet without ever developing or justifying it as part of a more general theory of truth.⁷ The second remarkable fact is that Spinoza voices this commitment, in axiomatic fashion, at the beginning of Part One (where the ontological framework of his approach is developed) and not, as one might expect, at the outset of Part Two, which deals with human thought and knowledge. This does not necessarily entail that truth is a property of beings, rather than of ideas or knowledge.⁸ But Spinoza evidently thinks that his commitment to a correspondence theory of truth already needs to be made explicit at this point, right at the beginning of his metaphysics. And this makes sense, at least if we recall that crucial claims of Spinoza's metaphysics are intended to secure the validity of his realist rationalism. In a nutshell, we can therefore interpret the normativity indicated by the verb "must" by ascribing to Spinoza a position that reflects some sort of implicit transcendental argument. Accordingly, what he seems to say in 1ax6 is that we *must* conceive of truth as a matter of true ideas corresponding with their *ideata*, or else we have to abandon any realist-rationalist agenda from the outset. Thus, Spinoza's commitment to a correspondence theory of truth points to some sort of transcendental condition; were it not on the basis of a correspondence-theoretical view on true ideas, the very claim that being is fully intelligible would lose its meaningfulness.

2. While 1ax6 promotes a correspondence theory of truth, it fails to address the question of *which conditions* must be met for our ideas to constitute genuine knowledge. The first clue, in this regard, is given at the beginning of Part Two, specifically in 2def4, which introduces the concept of adequate ideas. Following this definition, adequacy is a feature of ideas which, while being coextensive with truth, differs from truth in that it has nothing to do with

7. Walther 1971, 12 has a different emphasis here. Taking 1ax6 as evidence for Spinoza's apparent distinction between a correspondence theory of truth and a coherence theory of adequacy, he suggests that this distinction "enables thought to create the same reality that exists outside of thought, solely through the adequacy of its own ideas and without establishing a link to this external reality." Walther relies on the definitions in the TdIE here. Yet, in my view, this cannot explain what is at stake for Spinoza's ontological approach as it drives the metaphysics of the *Ethics*. See also Schnepf 1996 on this.

8. Wolfgang Bartuschat once made this claim during a discussion. Similarly, he is on record maintaining that the truth of ideas follows from their status as modes (Bartuschat 1992a, 110). I find this view problematic since bodies are modes as well, and Spinoza never says that bodies are true. Moreover, the *Ethics* mostly talks about true ideas, only occasionally referring to true causes or the truth of substances (1p8s2; C I, 413; G II, 49–50). Moreover, these passages must be understood to refer to true ideas of causes or of substances. Truth, for Spinoza, therefore has nothing to do with the ontological constitution of things but only with our knowledge of them.

the relation to the represented extramental object of the idea of which truth exists. Or, as the definition puts it, an adequate idea “has all the properties or intrinsic denominations of a true idea.”⁹ Spinoza apparently thinks, then, that true ideas are characterized by an additional quality, adequacy, which is generally accessible to our understanding. But as we saw while discussing Spinoza’s holism, adequacy cannot consist in a property belonging to true ideas conceived as isolated units. The concept, instead, is concerned with ideas insofar as they include their inferential relations. Concretely speaking, we saw that an idea is adequate if and only if it can be made explicit completely from the knowledge that makes up an individual mind. Now, this is possible only if the relations that hold between the ideas constituting a mind are inferential in nature. This is not usually the case for the human mind, where associative connections often play an equally significant role in constituting complex ideas. This indicates that Spinoza’s talk of adequate ideas is a normative matter. By qualifying an idea as adequate, we do not describe cognitive structures leading up to a specific thought—we actually assess the thought on the basis of its truth value. The concept of an adequate idea itself, however, does not serve as a *criterion* that allows for “measuring” an idea’s accuracy; it rather refers to a kind of *ideal end* that is in the focus of all our epistemic activity and will thus direct all our efforts toward the improvement of our knowledge.

3. The first two points here cover only one side of the semantic field laid out by Spinoza’s epistemological nomenclature. Another side becomes visible as soon as we turn our attention away from the concept of adequacy, which lies at the center of 2def4, and focus instead on the notion of *inadequacy*, as it is employed in 2p11c. What exactly is inadequate perception to be distinguished from? To answer this question, it is helpful to note that the inadequate perception of a thing is also described as a partial perception, which suggests a trichotomy. In fact, there are actually *two* contradistinctions to any cognition that is *only partially* contained in the idea that constitutes our mind: on the one hand, there is the knowledge that captures a thing *in its full determinacy*; on the other, there are cases in which we have *no knowledge at all* of the object in question, specifically when the idea of the thing is simply not contained in the idea constituting our mind. Thus, Spinoza does not simply separate accurate from false cognition, but he differentiates between ignorance and vague or incomplete half-knowledge, as well as between the latter and complete or adequate knowledge. This does not just take into account our everyday

9. C I, 447; G II, 85.

practice, in which we often refer to any vague, unfounded acquaintance with things or states of affairs as “knowledge”—it does so in a manner in which the principle of bivalence is left intact. Each proposition is either true or false, and calling an idea that we have of some thing inadequate or “half-true” simply means that, if expressed in propositions, it would turn out that our ideas contain both true and false propositions. Conversely, adequate ideas can be understood as ideas which, if expressed in propositions, would contain only true propositions.¹⁰

4. In epistemology and ethics alike, it makes sense to establish an ideal only if we can distinguish between varying degrees of approximating that ideal. Roughly speaking, it is not enough to differentiate between ignorance, partial perception, and full knowledge—we must also be capable, within the realm of inadequate ideas, of telling apart *more* and *less* adequate ideas. Now, it turns out that Spinoza’s explanation of inadequate perception, as defined in 2p11c, does indeed allow for further differentiations within the sphere of inadequacy—provided we combine it with the view that our ideas often refer to complex things or states of affairs. It makes perfect sense to assume that the idea constituting our mind contains an idea of some property of an object, whereas the ideas of other properties elude us. Thus, the evaluative predicate of an inadequate idea corresponds to an entire range of insights about a thing, some more accurate than others—a range which, in turn, correlates with the complexity of the thing in question. By assuming, therefore, a distinction between different degrees of adequacy, or rather inadequacy, we also admit that a complete (i.e., fully adequate) knowledge becomes less likely as the objects in question become more complex—although full knowledge can never be ruled out in principle.
5. The possibility of distinguishing between varying degrees of adequacy—or inadequacy—is also important for epistemological reflection on the epistemic value of our ideas. It is crucial to note that every instance of inadequate cognition involves elements of adequate knowledge. In other words, every inadequate idea contains at least one adequate idea. This can be illustrated best through an example. The sensation we receive from a body affecting us is highly inadequate if we consider it, itself, to be the *idea of that body*. But since this very sensation lets us realize the existence of extramental things, it also provides us with adequate knowledge, for it teaches us that reality in fact transcends us and our thought. This shows that statements about inadequate knowledge are always, and in a very specific sense, relative: an insight gained

10. This is not to say that truth, for Spinoza, is a property of propositions. See also Renz 2009a, 428.

from an idea is inadequate if and only if the subject has but an incomplete grasp of the knowledge the idea provides or does not provide.¹¹ The decisive question we therefore have to address, when considering our ideas from an epistemological perspective, is this: if any idea we have provides us with adequate knowledge, what exactly is the knowledge we have by means of our ideas really about? This, notably, requires us to concede that having an adequate idea does not yet imply that all questions we might have about a particular thing are actually answered to our satisfaction.

To summarize, we can say that Spinoza advocates a kind of epistemic perfectionism here. Propagating the ideal of a complete, or fully adequate, knowledge, he sets a genuinely epistemic goal for us. This goal is not only supposed to motivate all our epistemic efforts; it also allows for the conceptual differentiations we need to discern how close we have come to attaining that goal. This ultimately means that the requirements to be met for anyone claiming to have knowledge in the strong sense of the word are both very demanding and very weak. To attain true, and therefore complete, knowledge of singular things—say, the trees we look at or the people we meet—is a very difficult task. These things that seem so familiar are, in fact, so complex that it would require ideas of a large number of properties to attain complete knowledge of them. This is certainly not impossible in theory, but in reality it will hardly ever be the case. On the other hand, Spinoza concedes that our mental states, if analyzed properly, always contain true ideas. The inadequate idea of a particular tree, for instance, can easily contain the adequate idea of one of its properties, such as the property of being extended.

This has important implications for Spinoza's views on the mental. In 2ax3, he tells us that all mental states involve ideas. To this claim, we must now add the assumption that all mental states involve true ideas. This is why Spinoza can maintain, in 2p32, that all ideas are true as long as they refer to God. Spinoza does not commit himself to the view here that the ultimate origin of our ideas is an infinite being, nor does he claim that we would have to embrace such a view in order to attain true knowledge. His point is rather that all our ideas contain a true element, given that they at least refer to something real that exists or has existed at some point. There is no need for the assumption of a divine subject here, but, according to Spinoza, we can get the insight into the realism underlying any of

11. Here, Spinoza follows § 63 of the TdIE, which contains his interpretation of Descartes' truth criteria of clear and distinct knowledge. This has been shown by Ellsiepen 2011, 130. The *Ethics* also features these terms, as well as their antonyms, "confused" and "mutilated" knowledge (e.g., in 2p28, 2p29c, 2p35, and 2p38c). But these terms are not fixed terminologically, and they play only a negligible role. I shall thus refrain from discussing them any further at this point.

our ideas simply by analyzing them on the basis of their implicit ontological presuppositions. Thus, in my view, it is this implicit link to reality that Spinoza refers to in 2p32, when he talks about “ideas, insofar as they are related to God” and states that they are true.

This helps us to get a better idea of what it means to improve our epistemic situation and what makes such improvement possible, epistemically speaking, an issue that is addressed in the second half of Part Two of the *Ethics*. The goal is not simply to increase the amount of our scientific knowledge—although Spinoza clearly thinks that such an increase is perfectly possible and, since it ultimately transforms the knowledge of our own body, even desirable. But the actual goal is to pinpoint the epistemic value of those ideas we have anyway, owing to the affections of our body. If we manage to do this, we will be in a better position to identify the true ideas entailed in our mental states.¹² Thus, that increase of knowledge at stake here requires us to localize as precisely as possible those necessary truths that are implicit in any of our mental states.

Whether this is actually possible depends on additional requirements that have not yet been discussed. For one, such a process requires that subjects are capable of reflecting on their own ideas. For another, we need a theory and classification of concepts that can help us analyze our ideas and identify those parts that are necessarily true. These two problems will be discussed in the following sections, before which I shall return to the epistemic ideal underlying Spinoza’s perfectionism and take a closer look at his concept of intuitive knowledge.

b) The Possibility of Self-Reflection: The Conception of the idea ideae and Its Implications

In the German context, when discussing the concept of and conditions for the possibility of self-knowledge, philosophers tend to follow the framework of a debate that took place in Heidelberg in the 1960s, a debate that was inspired both by certain trends in analytical philosophy and by German idealism. In these discussions, we occasionally encounter a distinction between two levels of self-knowledge or epistemic self-reference: on the one hand, there is the notion of a pre-reflexive *Selbstwissen* (literally, “self-knowledge”), which is taken to consist in immediate self-knowledge, self-awareness, or some sort of self-feeling (*Selbstgefühl*); on the other hand, philosophers talk about a reflexive kind of self-cognition, mediated by acquired concepts or propositional knowledge. Falsifiable assertions appear only in the latter case, which is why some philosophers claim that only the second

12. In this context, Garrett 2003, 7, refers to a “self-clarificatory therapy.”

form of epistemic self-reference can legitimately be said to be *knowledge* in a more narrow sense.¹³

Spinoza's approach suggests a similar dichotomy. As I have shown at length, his concept of the human mind should be considered equivalent to that knowledge or awareness one has of one's own body and which is actualized whenever one notices that one's body is subject to some affection. This self-knowledge can be regarded as primitive in that it is implicitly present even in the most basic mental stirrings—that is, the sensation or perception of the body as being affected. But this is no reason, for Spinoza, to think of this self-awareness as some sort of foundational, primary, or immediate knowledge. On the contrary, as we have seen in Spinoza's treatment of imagination, the *Ethics* avoids an idealistic scenario by suggesting that the idea of the body itself, along with the ideas of external things, is implied in the ideas of the body's affections. Moreover, as Spinoza points out in 2p19, "[t]he human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected."¹⁴

The knowledge of one's own body and the knowledge that it exists are clearly correlated with our perception of the body's affections. Just as sensations and feelings are needed for self-knowledge to exist, self-knowledge is required for sensations and feelings to appear. Thus, the conception of the human being as fully self-conscious is denied from the outset. In the light of said correlation, we will have to adopt a more differentiated view that involves taking the concrete constitution of individuals endowed with minds into consideration. Take a snail, for example: we will be inclined to attribute to a snail a basic self-knowledge (and thus a mind, in Spinoza's sense), but we would surely abstain from considering the shell it carries around as self-conscious. Similarly, we can say that human beings harbor both elements or zones of self-conscious existence and elements or zones of unconscious existence. According to Spinoza, humans are always conscious of themselves as determined bodies, but they remain unaware of many physiological

13. The original impulse comes from Henrich 1966. But see also Frank 1991, 5–6 and 224 ff., as well as 2002, 133–4. For a critical viewpoint, see Tugendhat 1979, 53 ff. For a meta-critical survey, see Soldati 1988. For a defense in English, see Zahavi 2007. Wright 1998, whose position roughly coincides with Tugendhat's, raises the question whether we can really speak of knowledge in this instance.

14. C I, 466; G II, 107. We may ask how 2p13, or my reading of it, and 2p19 fit together. Doesn't 2p19 contradict the claim, made in 2p13, that every mind knows which body belongs to it? By no means. 2p13d already maintains, with recourse to 2ax4, that this kind of knowledge only exists if a thing has ideas of affections involving its body. In 2p19, Spinoza deals with the same issue but from a different point of view: 2p13 proves *that* we have this kind of knowledge about our own body, whereas 2p19 lays out the *conditions* for us to have this kind of knowledge.

events that take place in their body.¹⁵ And they remain just as unaware of many of that body's actions and effects. To appropriately account for the basic self-knowledge indicating a mind, we would therefore be well advised to accept the existence of transitions and gradations between the conscious and unconscious existence of subjects.

So there is this basic self-knowledge which, in some sense, forms the origin of a human's mental being. In contradistinction to this basic self-knowledge, Spinoza postulates another kind of epistemic self-relation, which goes beyond a person's knowing or feeling herself identical with her own body. In this other kind of self-relation, humans adopt a reflexive attitude toward their own mental states; the technical term Spinoza uses to designate this kind of reflexive self-knowledge is *idea ideae*. While this exact expression is first used in 2p21s, Spinoza justifies the existence of a reflexive self-knowledge as early as 2p20. In this proposition, he maintains that there is "in God an idea, or knowledge of the human mind, which follows in God in the same way and is related to God in the same way as the idea, or knowledge, of the human body."¹⁶

What exactly is being said here? Taking a look at this proposition, it is striking that its *demonstratio* makes extensive use of Spinoza's ontology of the mental, while wholly neglecting both 2p13 and his theory of the imagination. The task is to prove that there is an idea of that idea which constitutes our mind—and this proof is delivered simply by saying that, according to 2p3, there is necessarily an idea in God of everything that exists. And since ideas or modes in the attribute of thought are considered to exist (according to 2p1), this same rule applies, as a matter of course, to the idea constituting the mind itself, as described in 2p11. 2p20, then, voices neither an anthropological truth nor a cognitive-psychological observation—it is actually an ontological statement.¹⁷ Spinoza does not maintain here that we actually have reflexive knowledge of the idea of our body. He rather maintains that if the body is intelligible, then the idea of the body—and thus, the mind—is also intelligible. The human mind is intelligible precisely to the same extent that the human body is intelligible.

15. See Part III, Chapter 10, § c.

16. C I, 467; G II, 108.

17. Rice 1990a, 207, also claims that 2p20 does not yet address the actual self-knowledge humans may or may not have of their minds. However, Rice interprets the claim made in 2p20 against the backdrop of a rational-theological, rather than ontological, reading of Spinoza's metaphysics. For interpretations along ontological lines, see Gueroult 1974, 246 ff.; Amann 2000, 130; and Kisser 2003, 26. But they all think that 2p20 maintains a structural isomorphism between first- and second-order ideas, whereas I consider it to be a statement about the knowability of the mind.

The reflexive self-knowledge of the mind, then, is subject to the same conditions as the mind-constituting knowledge of the body. The concrete consequences are not spelled out until later—for instance, in 2p23, which states that the mind “does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body.”¹⁸ We said earlier that the basic self-knowledge that constitutes the mind is dependent on certain conditions—and neither is the reflexive self-knowledge. In fact, it is correlated with the reflexive knowledge of our perceptions. We also said that the mind-constituting knowledge of the body is inadequate knowledge—and so is the reflexive self-knowledge we may have of our mind, at least under normal circumstances.¹⁹ And yet, the possibility of reflexive self-knowledge is fundamentally secured by the link that prevails, according to Spinoza, between the intelligibility of the body and that of the mind. We can therefore assume that the reflexive knowledge of the mind can indeed become more adequate, to the same extent that our knowledge of the body increases, which happens when the mind succeeds in relating the body’s affections to—and explaining them through—the body’s constitution.

But there is also another side to the ontological explanation given in 2p20. This becomes clear as soon as we realize that the *demonstratio* of 2p20 does not apply exclusively to the mind-constituting idea of our own body but to all our thoughts and mental states. Strictly speaking, the demonstration proves that we have reflexive access to *all* our ideas and not just to the idea of our body. Indeed, Spinoza uses 2p20 in this general way in later propositions, for instance, 2p22 and 2p43.²⁰ He apparently thinks that, for ontological reasons, we can form reflexive ideas of all ideas we actually have, for all these ideas are real and therefore intelligible. It is only consistent if this includes the idea that, according to Spinoza’s definition, constitutes the subject’s mind itself. For if our mind is not categorically different from our mental states, then it will be intelligible just as they are.

18. C I, 468; G II, 110. Note that this proposition is actually based on 2p20.

19. See 2p29c, where Spinoza draws the following conclusion from 2p23: “From this it follows that so long as the human mind perceives things from the common order of nature, it does not have an adequate, but only a confused and mutilated knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies” (C I, 471; G II, 114). Thus, there is a direct connection between these three points: the claim that knowledge of the mind depends on knowledge of the body (2p20), the notion of a correlation of self-knowledge and reflexive knowledge of our perceptions (2p23), and the assessment of our self-knowledge as inadequate (2p29c).

20. See the following statement in parentheses, from 2p43d: “Of this idea [the true idea A] there must necessarily also be in God an idea which is related to God in the same way as idea A (by P20, whose demonstration is universal [NS: and can be applied to all ideas])” (C I, 479; G II, 123). Similarly, Spinoza tells us in 2p22d that this proposition—which states that the human mind also perceives the ideas of the affections of the body—will be proven in exactly the same manner as 2p20 (C I, 468; G II, 109).

We can conclude, then, that the *Ethics* raises the possibility that we are capable of gaining knowledge, through reflection, of the human mind—just as we are capable of gaining reflexive knowledge of our mental states. In the following sections, I elaborate in more detail how our reflexive knowledge can be improved, epistemologically speaking—that is, under which circumstances this knowledge can become more adequate. At this point, one question remains: what is the relationship between an idea of something and a *reflexive* idea of the very same thing? This further raises the question of how we are to understand the ontological status of reflexive ideas.

In this context, we must take a closer look at 2p21, where Spinoza tells us that the “idea of the mind is united to the mind in the same way as the mind is united to the body.”²¹ This proposition draws an analogy—the mind’s relation to the body is mirrored in the relation between the mind-constituting idea of the body and the reflexive idea of that idea. In other words, here, Spinoza applies the schema of aspect dualism to the relationship between ideas and reflexive ideas: one and the same thing—namely, our idea of *x* itself—can be assessed from two different perspectives, yielding either the idea of *x* or the idea of the idea of *x*. Like the two aspects of any idea, these two ideas can be separated only from an analytic standpoint.

This claim may not seem very compelling at first, especially if we read it as a claim about the reflexive ideas of all our ideas and not just the reflexive idea of the mind itself. Do we not face absurd consequences if the relationship between an idea and its reflexive counterpart—the idea of the idea—is considered to be so close that they actually represent two sides of the same coin? Is it not possible for us to be so absorbed in our thoughts that we lose ourselves in them, as it were, completely forgetting the fact *that* we are currently thinking of something specific? And conversely, is it not true that once we decide to seize a thought by adopting a reflexive attitude, we always do so after a minimal temporal delay? In other words, is it not the case that the idea of *x* always *precedes* the idea of the idea of *x*—which of course implies that the two ideas are *numerically different*?

Two things are to be noted here. First, we must realize that Spinoza himself, in the TdIE, describes the idea of the idea precisely in this manner, namely as an *ex post* reflection on a preceding thought process. And there are good reasons to assume that the *Ethics* is not intended to deviate from this conception but that it simply has a different focus.²² Second, we must recall that Spinoza relies

21. C I, 467; G II, 109.

22. The TdIE addresses the problem while discussing the notion of true ideas. Spinoza explicitly mentions both points, numerical difference and retrospection. Thus, in § 33, he states that a true idea is different from its object (C I, 17; G II, 14), and in § 34, he adds that “to know that

on his ontology in 2p20 (rather than invoking his cognitive psychology), when he parallels the intelligibility of the mind with the intelligibility of the body—which implies that the intelligibility of the idea of *x* is parallel to the intelligibility of *x* itself. We can assume that 2p21, too, addresses an ontological issue, namely how the content of ideas is related ontologically to their material point of reference.

Spinoza reacts to this question by drawing an analogy between the mind–body relation and the relation between the idea of the idea of *x* and the idea of *x* itself. This analogy is not meant to be a cognitive-psychological model of the reflexive process; if it were, it would be highly implausible. It rather points out that our reflexive ideas have no other objective reference than the original idea itself. The following example may illustrate this point. If someone asks me what I see when I look out the window, I can easily respond, “a wonderful old tree.” But if the same person finds me staring out the window instead of looking at my computer screen and asks me what I am dwelling on, I can also say, “I was just marveling at the beauty of the tree over there.” Of course, there is a temporal delay between my original contemplation of the tree’s beauty and my realization that I am, in fact, in awe. Furthermore, this second statement puts the stress on something that, in my earlier remark, was noticeable only by my emphatic tone in praising the tree’s beauty. But what I am ultimately referring to in my answer to the second question is nothing other than what my first reply had already evoked. I only give an account of the *fact* and the *manner* in which I let my thoughts dwell on the tree in front of my window.

In 2p21, Spinoza thus continues the train of thought he started in 2p20, by emphasizing that the option of making reflexive references to our ideas is already provided by these ideas themselves; reflection requires no additional entities beyond whatever it is we are attempting to reflect on. In this sense, each idea of an idea is already covertly present in the idea itself, for the idea we reflect on is all we need to be able to tell that we actually have this idea and to report its qualities. No additional information, in other words, is required for us to reflect on our ideas from an epistemological point of view; the ideas themselves are quite enough. Yet, the reverse is also true: our reflexive ideas do not generate any new information in the strong sense of the word since they refer to the same piece of

I know, I must first [*prius*] know” (C I, 18; G II, 15). As Matheron 1994, 85–7, convincingly shows, this *prius* must at least involve a temporal sense too, or else the passage cannot do what Spinoza wants it to—i.e., to preclude skeptical doubts by showing that any given true idea *already* involves some sort of certainty. Matheron also argues that, in the *Ethics*, the notion of temporal difference is still at stake.

reality as the idea itself—to the tree, for instance, or (in the case of reflexive self-knowledge) to the way our body feels when we contemplate the tree.²³

We can conclude that this analogy that Spinoza maintains between the mind–body relation and the relation between idea and reflexive idea has decisive implications for the entire approach of the *Ethics*. It highlights, once again, the genuinely realistic tendency of Spinoza's approach, by emphasizing that reflecting, for us, does not open up a new reality—it merely has us direct our attention to *the way in which* our thoughts refer to specific things. This is precisely why Spinoza can later employ the concept of the *idea ideae verae* to refute skepticism. If reflexive ideas cannot create new content, then the idea of a *true* idea is equally incapable of generating knowledge that we would not have had in the first place. And this is also why Spinoza can posit that a true idea serves as the vehicle for its own truth, whereas the *ideas* we have *of true ideas* merely account for entities we have already come to know independently from the existence of any reflexive idea.²⁴

There is one point, however, where this analogy does not hold. While the body and the mind belong to different attributes—and, thus, to different semantic and causal contexts—ideas and reflexive ideas are both modes in the attribute of thought.²⁵ This has significant consequences, which becomes clear as soon as we realize that—in contrast to the mind–body relation—causal interactions between ideas and reflexive ideas are possible. Given the necessity of temporal difference, we can rule out that the reflexive idea of an idea of a thing can *directly* influence the mental process it actually reflects on. But, in principle, our reflexive ideas can very well have an impact on our ideas of things and vice versa. Thus, the idea of the idea of x can influence the idea of y, and the idea of y can in turn determine our idea of the idea of z.

Now we understand how reflexive ideas can, in the long run, exert an enormous influence on the way we experience certain things or events, despite the fact that they cannot unlock any new extramental reality. It is conceivable that I realize, by way of reflection, that my perception of a given kind of thing or event always tends to be the same and that this realization has an impact on my future perception of the same kind of thing or event. This then generates other associations, which in turn are discovered by means of reflection, and so on.

23. This is also emphasized by Amann 2000, 130. Matheron 1994, 85, makes the same point when he writes, “[e]pistemology is not a part of science.”

24. See also the analysis of 2p43s in Matheron 1994, 87–90.

25. Spinoza mentions this in 2p21s, without, however, making the implications discussed above explicit. See C, 467; G II, 109.

Let's assume, for instance, that someone tends to perceive strong personalities as threatening. Upon reflecting on this, he might notice that certain associations stemming from his biography might be responsible. Or, he might realize that his perception owes its existence to his thinking of himself as inferior to others. If he manages to see these associations as contingent or to correct his self-perception, then his future perception of strong personalities is likely to change dramatically. As a result, his reflexive perception of *how* he experiences strong personalities will likely change in turn.

Thus, our reflexive ideas belong to the same causal context as the ideas to which they refer. They are both simply in God, or part of one and the same infinite intellect. That it is possible to form a reflexive idea of everything does not commit Spinoza to a model that distinguishes categorically between several levels or strata of thought. While the *Ethics* differentiates between ideas of things and ideas of ideas of things, this does not mean that the two belong to separate orders or systems. On the contrary, they are both organized in one and the same holistic net of thoughts—which is why, as has already been made clear, a mutual interaction can also be assumed between our experiences and our explanations of experiences.

Overall we can say, then, that Spinoza's doctrine of the *idea ideae*, and even more so its justification in terms of his most general ontological tenets, plays a crucial role in more than one regard. Given that there is "in God" an idea of all our ideas, there is always the option that we can take a reflexive stance toward anything we think, perceive, and feel. Thus, it is clear that all our ideas are, in principle, open to reflexive analysis and explanation. At the same time, as ideas of ideas are part of the same ontological order as any other idea, the concept of reflexive ideas also provides an important condition for the possibility that our own immediate experience of things and events can be subject to change.

c) *The Functional Principle of the Common Notions and the Possibility of Acquiring a General Knowledge of the Human Being*

When we talk about "self-knowledge" in everyday language, we usually have a rather demanding sort of knowledge in mind. Self-knowledge in this sense coincides neither with what is referred to as self-knowledge in analytic philosophy nor with what Spinoza posits when he allows for reflexive ideas of any given idea. Self-knowledge in this demanding sense has little to do with the fact that a person can identify her own body or that she perceives that body's affections. Nor is it limited to the mere possibility of reflecting on one's thoughts, perceptions, and

feelings. When we ascribe “self-knowledge” to someone, we instead refer to a peculiar mix of a general familiarity with human nature and individual insights into what motivates our own actions and experiences. Imagine somebody telling us that, after years of arduous learning, he has come to see why, at the age of twenty, he chose to enroll in Japanese studies and East Asian art, rather than following in his father’s footsteps by taking German studies and Swiss history. In this situation, we will attribute to the person an increase in self-knowledge because he managed to understand his own case by applying a general psychological understanding of what motivates young people in establishing certain preferences.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza envisions a similar mixture of self-knowledge and knowledge of human nature. Against this background, we can at least comprehend why, in his epistemology, he distinguishes between two different forms of adequate knowledge—one referring to the nature of bodies and things in general, the other directed at our grasp of the essences of individual things, and preferably of one’s own essence. Together, these two forms of adequate knowledge may produce a similar result to the combination outlined above. They enable us to take a general understanding of the conditions underlying human behavior and experience and to apply this understanding to one’s individual self.

In and by itself, this is not especially original. Different sorts of moralist self-inquiry have looked like this: a general understanding of human nature is put into the service of increasing one’s own self-knowledge. What is original, however, is the way in which Spinoza handles this mixture of human knowledge and self-knowledge and how he justifies its possibility. Not only does he strictly distinguish between two genuinely different forms of adequate knowledge, but he also justifies the possibility of both ontologically. As a result, his enterprise stands on stronger ground than could be claimed by any moralistic treatise that takes its cues from common-sense knowledge. In the following two sections, I reconstruct this in rough outline. First, I shall focus on one of the two poles only, namely the general knowledge of human properties and the conditions of human existence, as well as Spinoza’s epistemological justification of this sort of knowledge.

But first, let us take a step back. At first glance, it seems unlikely that we should actually be capable of having this kind of general knowledge about humans and human existence. Consider the propositions immediately following those in which Spinoza discusses his views on self-reflection: here, Spinoza flat out denies that humans can have adequate knowledge of themselves. It is not only that the human mind lacks “adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body.”²⁶ No less adequate is that knowledge of the body that is provided

26. 2p24, C I; 468, G II, 110.

by the sensations of bodily affections.²⁷ Moreover, in isolation, reflexive ideas do not fare any better either. Our sensations are confused, yes—but the same goes for the ideas referring to these sensations.²⁸ And the idea which the mind has of itself? Even this idea is neither clear, distinct, nor adequate.²⁹ Hence, the seemingly hopeless conclusion Spinoza draws in 2p29c, which states, “so long as the human mind perceives things from the common order of nature, it does not have an adequate, but only a confused and mutilated knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies.”³⁰

But this is not Spinoza’s last word. On the contrary, he thinks that we are ultimately capable of looking at things from a different perspective from that prescribed by the common order of nature. It is at least conceivable that an alternative view of things exists or can be established—and that this alternative view is presumably epistemically superior. But what exactly would this alternative view look like, and why should humans be capable of adopting it?

Spinoza first addresses these questions in the scholium following 2p29c. In this scholium, he tells us that the negative assessment of our epistemic possibilities expressed in 2p29c applies only to the knowledge a human mind acquires by adhering to this common order. It does not apply if the human mind “is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions,” in which case, Spinoza says, the mind “regards things clearly and distinctly.”³¹ 2p29c had indicated that there might be an alternative view of things—now, the prospect of such an alternative view is made explicit, and we also get a preliminary characterization. Two features stand out here. First, the mind determines itself “internally”—instead of being determined externally, by affections of some sort, to regard things in a certain way. Second, it regards several things at once—and not because their ideas

27. See 2p27: “The idea of any affection of the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human body itself” (C I, 470; G II, 112).

28. See 2p28: “The ideas of the affections of the human body, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused” (C I, 470; G II, 113).

29. There are two passages to be mentioned here, one being 2p28s, where Spinoza, in analogy with 2p28, claims that “[i]n the same way we can demonstrate that the idea that constitutes the human mind is not, considered in itself alone, clear and distinct; we can also demonstrate the same of the idea of the human mind and the ideas of the ideas of the human body’s affections . . . insofar as they are referred to the mind alone” (C I, 470; G II, 113). The other passage is 2p29, which states that “[t]he idea of the idea of any affection of the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human mind” (C I, 470; G II, 113).

30. C I, 471; G II, 114.

31. C I, 471; G II, 114.

are connected through associations but because the mind recognizes how these things coincide, differ from each other, or contradict each other.

But why is this alternative view an improvement, from an epistemological point of view? The answer seems to be this: the alternative view is better because it has the mind focus on features qualifying the relations between things, rather than having it focus on the obvious properties of particulars. Now, whether a mind is actually able to adopt this alternative view depends on two mental prerequisites—which are merely indicated by the features emphasized above. First, the individual must be able to focus on several things at once; and second, it must be capable of determining itself internally, to regard things in a certain way.

From our previous observations, it is clear that the human mind has no problems fulfilling the first criterion: as early as 2p13s, Spinoza maintains that a complex individual is generally capable of regarding many things at once. More precisely, the complex individual is so capable to the extent to which its body is capable of doing or suffering many things at once.³² Clearly, according to Spinoza, human beings possess these abilities to a high degree, which can be seen from the postulates that conclude the physical digression, as well as the consequent proposition 2p14.³³

The second point poses a more serious problem. What does it mean that the mind determines itself internally to regard things in a certain way? And how is the human mind capable of doing so? In this context, some interpreters refer to something that could justly be called the power of reflection: it is sometimes emphasized that the mind, by forming a reflexive idea of an idea, creates a certain distance between itself and the objects represented in the original idea.³⁴ Spinoza describes this in an exemplary manner in the opening passage of the TdIE, when, in section 11, he has the narrator say of his previous reflections, “I saw this, however: that so long as the mind was turned toward these thoughts, it was turned away from those things [that constitute the objects of his previous desire].”³⁵ Apparently, ideas are capable of pushing other ideas into the background of our attention. And as soon as we realize this, so the suggestion goes, we can

32. “I say this in general, that in proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once” (C I, 458; G II, 97).

33. 2p14: “The human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable, the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways” (C I, 462; G II, 103).

34. That reflection may have this effect is emphasized in particular by Bartuschat 1992a, 108, and 1996, 207, as well as (relying on the latter) by Ellsiepen 2011, 135.

35. C I, 10; G II, 7.

strategically employ this option and form reflexive ideas of our ideas in order to temporarily restrain the power that certain representations have over us.

But this explanation is only partly satisfactory. As Spinoza indicates in the same passage from the TdIE, to distance oneself from misleading ideas does not constitute a final therapy; it only suggests that ideas—including the worst and most tormenting ideas—are treatable in principle *if* there are effective antidotes.³⁶ In other words, the act of reflection as such can only grant a respite but not provide a cure. Moreover, if we look at the theory of affects developed in the *Ethics*, it is by no means clear that our reflexive ideas are, in fact, an expression of our power—they might just as well be a token of our weakness. As we know from Spinoza's remarks about the imitation of affects, it is perfectly possible that present affects are triggered simply through the reflexive idea of an earlier affection. For instance, even if we can suppress the idea of something we are terrified of by realizing *that* we are terrified of that thing, it will not help, for the idea of the idea of something that terrifies us will be an idea that evokes the feeling of terror in us. Seen in this light, at least, the reflection on inadequate ideas is quite the double-edged sword: while allowing us to gain some distance, it exposes us to the very mechanisms that can generate affects through pure imagination.

Thus, the mere repetition of ideas—even at the level of reflection—is capable of reproducing the old affects. On the other hand, reflection itself becomes a therapy if the reflexive ideas are at least more adequate than the ideas to which they refer and if we also gain insight into the inferences suggesting these more adequate ideas.³⁷ What constitutes the antidote to our ideas, then, is to be found

36. This can be seen from the way in which already quoted § 11 of the TdIE continues: "That was great comfort to me. For I saw that those evils would not refuse to yield to remedies." Note that Spinoza does not maintain here that reflection is itself the remedy. His point is rather that the insight into its diverting effect taught him that it must be possible, in principle, to free oneself from certain thoughts. In contrast, when he says in 5p16 that the "love toward God must engage the mind most" (C I, 604; G II, 290), he is talking of what he considers the ultimate true remedy against our passions and not a preliminary palliative means.

37. Cook 2002, 174, has argued that Spinoza calls for something impossible if, in 5p3, he proposes the forming of adequate ideas of some passion as a remedy for this passion. I do not share this critical attitude; in fact, his argument relies on premises I do not affirm. First, his interpretation of Spinoza's concept of the *conatus* is different from mine and, second, his critique suggests that the ideas of the ideas in question follow from the inadequate ideas constituting our passions, a view I am not committed to. Note, however, that Cook elaborates on something quite important. Without naming it explicitly, he shows that Part Five implicitly relies on two different conceptions of therapy that are nowadays often considered contraries, namely psychoanalysis and behavioral therapy. This has major implications, for if one were to allow for adequate knowledge of inadequate ideas (Cook aside), then one would consider it a crucial point of Spinoza's approach that he *combines* these two options. This also explains why the view he is advocating does not simply rely on the notion that knowledge makes us more powerful but rather on the option that insight into the causes of our affects may help us to control them.

not in the process of reflexive cognition itself but in the higher amount of adequacy such a process may bring about, if we combine it, for instance, with an inquiry into the causes of our affection. Of course, in the best-case scenario, reflection results in some sort of self-knowledge. But it need not; any adequate idea will help in suppressing passions, and this is also why, in Part Five of the *Ethics*, Spinoza can claim that “the love toward God must engage the mind most.”³⁸

Against this background, we must assume that the possibility of taking a reflective stance toward one’s own ideas is only one necessary condition for Spinoza’s dictum, in 2p29s, that the mind determines itself internally to regard several things at once. Thus while the human mind comes with the cognitive equipment to perceive things, to regard several things at once, and to take distance, through reflection, from the objects of its representations, it does not automatically attain a clear and distinct knowledge of these objects. On the contrary: for Spinoza, too, there is a difference between the mind’s potential and its actual knowledge.

Nonetheless, according to Spinoza, humans are in principle capable of forming adequate ideas of things and their properties and thus of knowing them in the strong sense of the word, and this is not undermined by the insight that the ideas that humans actually have rarely constitute knowledge in this strong sense. A likewise differentiated stance also drives Spinoza’s views on the problem of how humans can acquire general knowledge of the properties of humans and the conditions of their being. Humans are constantly inclined to be deceived about themselves; in the appendix to Part One, Spinoza discusses why this is so, but this is no reason to preclude that we should ever have true anthropological knowledge. The question is what this general knowledge is supposed to look like. What is its precise object? And how can it be justified from an epistemological point of view?

For the most part, Spinoza answers this question when he discusses his doctrine of the common notions—which, in a certain sense, forms the conceptual complement of 2p29s—in which scholium, Spinoza opens the prospect of gaining insight into the agreements, differences, and contradictions among things. As so often in the *Ethics*, the assumption of there being common notions is grounded in an ontological reflection, which begins in 2p37. Spinoza maintains here that “[w]hat is common to all things . . . and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any particular thing.”³⁹ The main support for this proposition comes from a reference to 2def2, which states that “to the

38. C I, 604; G II, 290. The Latin text uses the verb *occupare* here: the love of God must occupy the mind the most. Operating on the presumption that there is only limited space for ideas in our mind, the wording here is quite favorable to my reading.

39. C I, 474; G II, 118.

essence of any thing belongs that . . . without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived."⁴⁰ 2p37 thus draws our attention to something which follows from the concept of essence—or, rather, from something which this concept indirectly suggests—that particular things (i.e., those kinds of things that can be multiply instantiated) will be endowed with *additional* necessary properties, aside from the properties that imply the existence of an individual.⁴¹

As for the difference between the essences of things and their nonessential, but still necessary, properties, it is worth asking whether Spinoza really wants to draw a categorical distinction here between two genuinely different types of properties. Generally speaking, I am inclined to say no. Considering Spinoza's holistic approach, the essence of a thing can consist only in its being completely determined by its properties—which is why, by acquiring complete knowledge of a thing's essence, we are able to decide whether or not the thing in question currently exists or has existed at some point in the past.⁴² Conversely, knowing some feature of a thing that we would identify as a nonessential property of that thing can be a significant step toward knowing the essence of a thing. This requires that the nonessential features of a thing are necessary ingredients of its essence, which seems to run counter to the idea of a categorical gap. Nonetheless, the distinction between the knowledge of nonessential properties and the knowledge of singular essences is both plausible and significant, for it serves as an *ad hoc* differentiation in epistemic situations in which we have not yet attained a complete knowledge of things. In fact, this kind of preliminary epistemic situation in which we normally find ourselves—having not yet grasped the essence of things—is conceivable only because of this distinction. Thus, the distinction between essential and nonessential necessary properties of things is relevant primarily from an *epistemological* point of view. This is also how it forms the conceptual background for two different kinds of adequate knowledge. The common notions refer to the *nonessential necessary determinations* of things, which is why they grant an adequate knowledge that is nonetheless only preliminary because it constitutes only a partial knowledge of things.⁴³ Intuitive knowledge, on the other hand, by

40. C I, 447; G II, 84.

41. Relatedly, see also the way in which Spinoza employs the concept of essence in 2p10.

42. Note that this reading of Spinoza's concept of essence does *not* contradict his identification of the actual essence of a thing with its *conatus*. Or, more to the point, it does not contradict it as long as we take my reading of the concept of *conatus* as being constituted by a thing's tendency to keep itself in a given condition, rather than as consisting in a striving for self-preservation.

43. But see also Parkinson 1954, 177–8, for an alternative reading.

claiming to grasp the singular essences of things, aims to know things in their full determinacy.⁴⁴

Yet, this is only a preliminary definition of common notions: they are notions that refer to properties that things necessarily have but which, in and by themselves, do not grant us knowledge of the things' existence. But to understand why we can have, or form, these kinds of notions, we must analyze the following propositions. In 2p38, Spinoza maintains that "[t]hose things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be perceived adequately."⁴⁵ And in 2p38c, he concludes that "there are certain ideas, *or* notions, common to all men. For (by L2) all bodies agree in certain things, which (by P38) must be perceived adequately, *or* clearly and distinctly, by all."⁴⁶

Note that these two claims address the adequacy of our ideas, rather than their truth. The question is thus not whether our concepts of certain properties correspond to the real state of affairs. This issue at stake is, rather, which semantic relations to which ideas actually enable us to know these properties. In a nutshell, we could also say that 2p38 posits the possibility of our knowing the truth, rather than proving the truth of our ideas. Consequently, 2p38d shows that the idea of some property shared by all bodies, if such a property actually exists, must be presupposed in all our ideas of our body, of external bodies, and of our body's being affected by external bodies. It is striking that Spinoza's argument is purely hypothetical: he tells us how we are to conceive of the basic mechanisms by which the human mind acquires knowledge of these properties, without already claiming that such knowledge exists.

To get a better grasp of this, we should get a clearer picture of the properties in question. 2p37 already gives us a hint. Here, Spinoza includes a reference, in parentheses, to 2p13sLem2, which claims that "[a]ll bodies agree in certain things."⁴⁷ This apparently refers to properties whose presence we take for granted whenever we conceive of something as a body. The demonstration of 2p13sLem2

44. Note that the distinction drawn here is independent of the ontological terms "substance," "attribute," and "mode," which are invoked in 2p40s2 in the discussion of the concept of intuitive knowledge. This is important insofar as it allows for transitions between rational and intuitive knowledge. For instance, we can consider the attribute of extension as both an essential property of the substance and a nonessential, but necessary, property of bodies. We can, in other words, know by employing the common notion of extension that all bodies are extended, while, by the same token, knowing intuitively that extension is essential for being. But see Ellsiepen 2011, 135; Amann 2000, 286–7; and Parkinson 1954, 165, who all draw a strict distinction between the two kinds and bodies of knowledge here.

45. C I, 474; G II, 118.

46. C I, 474; G II, 119.

47. C I, 459; G II, 98.

specifies this by stating that bodies are always extended and that they can sometimes move and sometimes be at rest.⁴⁸ What we can know necessarily, then, are the following properties common to all bodies: that they are extended things and that they are always in a certain state of motion. Notably, the second of these features also expresses the principle by which bodies are individuated.⁴⁹ In retrospect, therefore, the reference to 2p13sLem2 also explains why 2p29s mentions not only agreements among things but also differences and oppositions: it is one and the same property—that bodies are either at rest or in motion—that makes bodies agree with each other while also allowing for the constitution of different individuals. This is because all bodies are moveable, but not all of them are in the same states of motion.

The question arises whether Spinoza does not unduly depend on Cartesian natural philosophy here—and thus on relatively contingent premises. This question is all the more important as it arises at a crucial point in Spinoza's overall argument, namely where he, having given all kinds of ontological reasons for adopting a realist rationalism, goes on to discuss epistemological justification. Indeed, Spinoza's concept of bodies as extended and movable things is based mostly on Cartesian physics and thus, historically speaking, on a quite specific model, from which we would be inclined to distance ourselves today, given the body's biological, social, and even cultural determinations. But to decide to what extent Spinoza actually depends on this historical model, we must take a very careful look at the details of Spinoza's argument.

First, we must recall that 2p13sLem2, although mentioned in parentheses in 2p37, is not employed for argumentative purposes before 2p38c, while 2p38 itself operates on merely hypothetical grounds. Second, we must emphasize that, strictly speaking, the reference to 2p13sLem2 supports only the assumption *that* this kind of property exists. *Exactly which* properties these are is completely irrelevant for the argument. Of course, this does not preclude that, in his *conception* of the common notions, Spinoza is indebted to Cartesian natural philosophy. In this sense, the Cartesian model is indeed of paradigmatic importance for Spinoza's epistemology. Nonetheless, the arguments of 2p38 and 2p38c work regardless of what bodies actually are or how they are conceived. The aforementioned transition from an ontological to an epistemological grounding of Spinoza's realism is thus independent, at least in principle, from the concrete historical model of Cartesian natural philosophy. This also explains the exact wording of the conclusion drawn in 2p38c: unlike 2p38 itself, the corollary talks about ideas or

48. C I, 459; G II, 98.

49. See also the discussion of the constitution of individuals in Part I, Chapter 3.

concepts that all humans, *as epistemic subjects*, have in common. Thus, the gist of Spinoza's argument is this: since, due to their minds, humans all have some ideas of bodies and since all bodies have some properties in common, humans must also be capable of developing the kinds of concepts employed in physics and natural philosophy.

Read in this way, the concept of the common notions is thus introduced to make a case for some sort of functional principle for any reliable formation of concepts, rather than to tell us which things or properties can be known adequately.⁵⁰ Accordingly, we can form concepts modeled after these common notions (as Spinoza does in his reconstruction of Cartesian physics) whenever the following conditions are fulfilled: first, we must be dealing with properties belonging to a thing both "in the part and in the whole" and, second, we must be able to identify these same properties in ourselves. Note, therefore, that if we manage to articulate scientific knowledge in the form of common notions, then, by the same token, we also make progress in our self-cognition. If I know how bodies are moved and how they are constituted and if I know that I am a body myself, then I will be capable of reconceptualizing my own bodily experience.

But to arrive at more precise explanations, the functional principle of the common notions cannot be limited to properties common to *all* things; instead, we must also try to use it to analyze more specific features. To achieve this, we must refine the concept of the common notions, as it were, and apply it to properties that humans share only with certain things.⁵¹ In 2p39, Spinoza shows us how this works. In analogy to 2p38, he demonstrates that the human mind has adequate knowledge even of those properties that it shares with bodies affecting its own body.⁵² Thus, the functional principle of the common notions allows us to develop not only a physics but also a biology and—as we can see from Part Four of the *Ethics*—even a social philosophy. This is because the bodies that affect us are not limited to stones, tables, and apples—they also, and especially, comprise other human beings on whom we depend more or less directly.

In conclusion, we can paint the following picture of the knowledge Spinoza has in mind when he develops the concept of the common notions: it is knowledge that must always refer to ourselves but which must not refer to properties making up our singular essence; it must pertain to properties we share with

50. But see Bartuschat 1992a, 113, for whom the common notions belong in a strict sense to the domain of physics.

51. Gueroult 1974, 334, also names these more refined concepts "notions communes propres."

52. 2p39: "If something is common to, and peculiar to, the human body and certain external bodies by which the human body is usually affected, and is equally in the part and in the whole of each of them, its idea will also be adequate in the mind" (C II, 474; G II, 119).

many other things—and other humans, of course. We could also say, therefore, that Spinoza's conception of the common notions lays the epistemological grounds for the possibility of an anthropology based on scientific knowledge. Perhaps some might object that the categories Spinoza actually invokes here are too coarse to describe the behavior and experience of human beings in a satisfactory fashion. We could ask, for instance, if physical properties such as motion and rest, physical complexity, and stability are really relevant for the human condition. Objections of this kind do not really threaten Spinoza's enterprise, however, for when Spinoza advances his concept of the common notions, he does not intend to provide a dense description of human existence and experience. The common notions are nothing but the most general conceptual cornerstones, intended to provide both guidance and legitimacy for any attempt at developing a general theory of the human being. If we think these cornerstones are solid, we are not dismissing the possibility that they can serve as tent poles for a much more subtle net of anthropological, psychological, or phenomenological categories.

*d) The Completion of Spinoza's Realist
Rationalism, or the Concept of Intuitive Knowledge*

The functional principle of the common notions, by which Spinoza justifies the assumption of there being some possibility of a general knowledge of bodies and humans, has a negative side to it. Imagine we describe a thing by using a concept that, by definition, refers to properties common to a great many things, in the part and in the whole. In this case, we could hardly claim to have very specific knowledge of this particular thing. So, if we try to understand humans and their behavior through concepts modeled after the common notions, we will indeed form *adequate* ideas of their properties. But our knowledge will be nonetheless deficient insofar as common notions will never let us grasp a singular thing—or a singular person—in its singular essence.

There are two ways to react to this problem. On the one hand, we can completely forgo the claim that particular things can be known in their singular determinacy. We would thus have to give up our ordinary conviction that we can know, or wish to know, certain things as singular entities (especially places and people)—that is, we can have objectual knowledge and not just propositional knowledge. One thing is clear: regardless of the epistemological underpinning we choose to attach to these everyday convictions, they show that, in claiming to have knowledge of a thing, we take ourselves to know more than just some of its properties. Knowing a city involves more than knowing its geographical coordinates; likewise, knowing a person cannot be reduced to knowledge of

her age, blood type, and temperament. If, on the other hand, we do not want to categorically preclude that things can, in principle, be known in their singular determinacy—however ambivalent, presumptuous, or dangerous we may in fact find such claims—then we have to assume that there must be some further way of truly knowing things that goes beyond what Spinoza has in mind with his concept of the common notions.

Spinoza cannot possibly be interested in the first option—this much is clear from Part II here, which discussed his rationalism. He must hold on to the possibility of an alternative way of knowing, or he will face the following dilemma: he would have to either abandon the claim that being is completely intelligible or else deny that individuals are existing singular things. Both options seem out of the question. To posit a third genus of knowledge, therefore, not only completes Spinoza's realist rationalism but also forms a sort of *sine qua non* condition for its coherence. There is only one way for Spinoza to hold on to his rationalism (which posits that being is completely intelligible): he must give plausible reasons for the existence of a third form of knowledge that departs from both the various ways of representing things in the imagination and from the rational knowledge based on the common notions. And this third kind of knowledge must not only be adequate but also refer to singular things in their individual specificity.

Let us now take a closer look at Spinoza's definition of intuitive knowledge against this backdrop. This definition is established in 2p40s2 by separating this kind of knowledge from the other two kinds—imaginative and rational knowledge. In particular, intuitive knowledge is described here as proceeding "from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the . . . essence of things."⁵³ Two things are worth noting here: first, intuitive knowledge is knowledge of essences and, second, it proceeds from the knowledge of the essence of certain attributes of God.

The previous section set out what knowledge of essences consists in. There, we discussed the difference between nonessential necessary determinations and the essence of a thing. We saw that intuitive knowledge requires that we have a perfect grasp of a thing in all its determinations, such that we also comprehend its existence or comprehend all that can be known adequately about it,⁵⁴ as necessary. Thus, what Spinoza has in mind with his concept of *scientia intuitiva* is

53. C I, 291; G II, 122. I have dealt with this definition in more detail in Renz, forthcoming.

54. Such a restriction is suggested by 2p30, where it is explicitly denied that we can adequately know the duration of our body. This does, however, not preclude that we can have adequate knowledge of the body itself, which is why this proposition is quite compatible with Spinoza's doctrine of the mind's eternity.

knowledge of the singular essences of things, which grants only knowledge of their existence. In any case, he is not referring to any general or specific essence.⁵⁵

Against this background, it is easy to make sense of the second of the two points mentioned above. To grasp a thing's existence as necessary, it is not enough to possess a vague knowledge of its essence; rather, it requires a knowledge that is itself adequate and thus complete. This is, I assume, also the reason why Spinoza takes intuitive knowledge to originate in the knowledge of the essence of certain attributes of God. As I read it, this primarily means that this knowledge must be complete. As such, it expresses the same normative aim that we have already encountered in the notion of adequacy. Having an adequate idea of thing, or knowing it intuitively, we must be capable of fully explaining the thing in question including all its features, which is why Spinoza specifies that intuitive knowledge starts with the most basic and simplest ideas.

Thus, intuitive knowledge is characterized in two ways by completeness: it is *complete* knowledge of the *complete* determination of things. This is what distinguishes intuitive knowledge from rational knowledge through common notions, among other things. Granted, knowledge based on common notions is conclusive as well: being an adequate idea, rational knowledge must be explicated fully through the knowledge that constitutes our mind. By definition, however, knowledge of this kind always refers to properties that several things have in common, making it impossible for us to use a common notion in order to grasp an individual thing in its singular essence, that is, in its complete individual determination. Yet, this also shows that procedural transitions from the second kind of knowledge to the third are actually possible—despite the difference between them. The implicit point behind this binary is this: if we spend enough time exerting ourselves to form adequate ideas of a thing's several nonessential necessary properties, thus adding more and more features to our conception of it, we will eventually get to the position where we recognize the thing itself in its complete determination. We can now grasp and “see” it, as it were, as necessary in its entirety. Intuitive knowledge of a thing can thus arise from the rational

55. But see Gueroult 1974, 607, for the opposite view, a view he defends by pointing out that singular things cannot be deduced from God. It is true that the notion of some singular essence cannot be derived from the concept of substance (see also Bartuschat 1992a, 44). Yet, this poses no problem for my reconstruction of Spinoza's rationalism, which relies not on the claim of an overall deduction, in constructivist manner, as it were, of all things from God, but on the assumption of their complete intelligibility. This only requires that any thing we know to exist can also be comprehended in its singular essence. That intuitive knowledge consists in the grasp of singular essences is also maintained by Mignini 1990; Yovel 1989, 162, and 1990; and Ellsiepen 2011. By contrast, Cristofolini 1996, 83, talks of singular existences; he prefers this view because it accentuates the complexity of the production of intuitive knowledge.

knowledge of all its properties—although, in the end, these two kinds of knowledge remain genuinely different.

But is this transition something that finite subjects are at all capable of? When Spinoza introduces the concept of intuitive knowledge, does he think that humans can actually attain this kind of knowledge, or does he merely set an epistemological limit? Maybe his intention is merely to establish an ideal yet unattainable intelligible goal, whose sole function is to guide our efforts at improving our knowledge.

Two things need to be emphasized here. First, note that Spinoza apparently considers the genus of intuitive knowledge to be something we are quite familiar with. This can be seen from the example of the fourth proportional number, which Spinoza brings up right after intuitive knowledge has been defined in order to illustrate the difference between the three kinds of knowledge. Specifically, intuitive knowledge is compared with the following process:

But in the simplest numbers none of this is necessary. Given the numbers 1, 2, and 3, no one fails to see that the fourth proportional number is 6—and we see this much more clearly because we infer the fourth number from the ratio which, in one glance, we see the first number to have to the second.⁵⁶

If we take this example at face value, we must reject the notion that intuitive knowledge could be completely alien to, unattainable by, or even overtaxing for our understanding. On the contrary, it seems that we are quite familiar not only with this type of knowledge but also with the satisfaction it provides. Indeed, anyone who has succeeded in solving a mathematical equation knows the feeling of elation that arises, having just brought a demanding epistemic task to completion.

Yet, the passage also mentions a second peculiarity that points in the opposite direction as it indicates that the requirements for knowing things intuitively are rarely satisfied. Note that Spinoza makes it quite explicit that he takes our intuitive knowledge of the fourth propositional number to rely on the fact that the three given numbers are most simple, *simplicissimi*. Keeping in mind that he defines intuitive knowledge as a complete knowledge of the complete determination of things, it is quite clear what he wants to show here. That the numbers must be “the simplest” illustrates the nature of the prerequisites for intuitive knowledge. It emphasizes that to know a thing intuitively, that is, to grasp it at

⁵⁶ C I, 478; G II, 122.

once in its full determination, we must first have adequate knowledge of all those properties that, when taken together, let us know it conclusively. Thus, to decide what entities we are capable of knowing intuitively, we have to consider what needs to be known previously. In our example, the task is so trivial that every beginner in mathematics will be capable of completing it, as long as the three original numbers are provided. The situation is different with more complex numerical relations. In those cases, a trained mathematician or someone skilled in mental arithmetic might still be capable of grasping the fourth proportional number intuitively—but the requirements for intuitive knowledge are no longer met by everyone.

But this stops short of answering the question of whether intuitive knowledge can actually be attained. Strictly speaking, the example of the fourth proportional number only tells us about cases so simple that we can meet the intellectual requirements to cognize intuitively. Left open is the question of whether we are also capable of intuitively knowing the essence of real singular things—and not merely of rational beings—*entia rationis*—such as numbers.⁵⁷

If we take heed of what the *Ethics* has to say about this, our chances of actually acquiring some intuitive knowledge are not too bad. In propositions 2p45–2p47, Spinoza assumes that humans meet the most basic requirement for gaining intuitive knowledge of singular things. 2p47 states that, “[t]he human mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence”⁵⁸—which enables us, according to 2p47s, “to deduce from this knowledge a great many things which we know adequately, and so can form that third kind of knowledge of which we spoke in 2p40s2 and of whose excellence and utility we shall speak in Part V.”⁵⁹ Spinoza thus assumes that we can in fact have, or form, intuitive knowledge. But let’s take a closer look at Spinoza’s wording here. Does he say that we deduce the singular essence of a thing—or even intuitive knowledge itself—from our knowledge of God’s essence? He does not. He rather maintains that our knowledge of God’s infinite essence brings about two *separate* results: we can deduce a great many things (*plurima*) from it, and so, *atque adeo*, we are capable of

57. In Spinoza scholarship, this example is often considered as mere analogy, see, e.g., Garrett 2003, 197, and Ellsiepen 2011, 142. For the ontology of number, see also Letter 12 to Lodewijk Meyer, where Spinoza says that “measure, time, and number are nothing but modes of thinking, or rather, of imagining” (C I, 203; G IV, 57). This does not, as Matheron 1986a, 146–9, explicitly argues, preclude that arithmetic knowledge is true knowledge. Still, it needs to be emphasized that, for Spinoza, arithmetic, or, more generally, mathematics, has a merely instrumental function grounding our knowledge of real entities.

58. C I, 482; G II, 127.

59. C I, 482; G II, 128.

forming knowledge of the third kind. How these two things are related remains an open question. I suggest that we are in fact dealing here with two different possible consequences of knowing the essence of God, with the second—intuitive knowledge—following from the first and summing it up, as it were. Read in this way, the passage is a good match to what has been said so far. First, it supports the claim, laid out in the previous chapter, that the functional principle of the common notions grants us the ability to comprehend, step by step, different sorts of properties that apply to several types of things. Second, it also takes into account something I hinted at in the context of the discussion of Spinoza's epistemological perfectionism: that the acquisition of adequate ideas of the properties of some thing results in a higher degree of adequacy of the idea we have of the thing itself.

We can now give a better elaborated answer to the question of what exactly is required for intuitive knowledge. We can assume that the more complex things are, the steeper the requirements for forming an adequate knowledge of them. Seen in this light, our knowledge of the essence of God is not enough to grant us intuitive knowledge of things—it only provides us with the most basic premises from which we can derive additional knowledge. However, the extent to which things can be known intuitively depends both on their complexity and on our preexisting knowledge. It is far less likely for us to have an intuitive grasp on concrete singular things—things encountered in everyday life—than it is for us to gain intuitive knowledge of simple numerical relations.

Human individuals in particular tend to be so complex that we rarely, if ever, have a full grasp on them in their full determination. Yet, there seem to be more distinctions to be made. As Spinoza points out in Part Five, there is a basic correlation between the intuitive knowledge we have of ourselves—as individual body and singular mind, with the latter relating to the former—and the intuitive knowledge of singular things other than ourselves.⁶⁰ But this, it seems, is eventually a matter of degree, or of parts or aspects of our selves. Our mind can only be the cause of some further knowledge of the third kind insofar as we know ourselves intuitively. This does not contradict 2p47s, which assumes that we possess the basic tools to intuit a great many things—on the contrary, it merely tells us that we require something in addition to these tools.

What does this mean for the issue of the explainability of experience? Let's recall the interpretation of 2p9c given above: events involving singular things are explainable precisely to the extent to which the things in which these events occur are epistemically accessible to us. This includes events that we would consider

60. See also Ellsiepen 2006, 114–5.

experiences of subjects. We can assume that an experience will be explainable to the extent to which we know the subject of that experience. In the context of Spinoza's epistemology, it is clear that we will seldom have a *complete* grasp of those things that we consider to be subjects of experience. We may know their basic physical properties, and we may also know some of their social properties—at least the ones they choose to share with us. This ultimately means that we can explain their experiences only within these parameters. Only in rare cases will we, in addition, have access to properties derived from a subject's biography. We will thus often lack the basic knowledge to understand a specific experience by proceeding from these kinds of determining properties. Therefore, if I want to attain complete knowledge of an individual, my best option is to strive to know that individual whose entire history I have actually experienced—myself. But even knowledge of this individual is not self-evident either. For while we are constantly aware of ourselves, we also relate to ourselves as highly complex objects of experience. It is no accident that even our own experiences sometimes strike us as a mystery wrapped within an enigma. But one of Spinoza's key insights is this: if we managed to gain intuitive knowledge of ourselves, then we would be able to explain the totality of our experiences; and since these experiences always relate to extramental things, we would also be able to grasp a great many other things.

Overall, then, Spinoza gives a rather ambivalent answer to the question of whether intuitive knowledge can be obtained. On the one hand, he differs from Leibniz, for whom this kind of knowledge seems to be reserved for the divine understanding, in allowing the finite human subject to have access to intuitive knowledge. The *Ethics* allows the human subject the possibility of intuitive knowledge, insofar as we can explain something completely and conclusively. Intuitive knowledge is the final stage of a process composed of various steps, a process every human being can initiate, no matter what. Thus, if someone sets out to intuitively grasp her own experiences, and thus herself, we should not consider this an exercise in futility. On the other hand, the requirements for such an intuitive grasp are very demanding, which is particularly true for the things and events we must understand to explain experience. Thus, it is difficult to see how a single person could ever manage to obtain intuitive knowledge of such complex things.

One might bemoan this ambiguous answer; it could be considered a deficiency or a gap in Spinoza's argument. I do not think so. Spinoza's rationalism forms the basis for his claim that subjective experience is fully explainable. The only thing the *Ethics* has to prove is that this is in itself a coherent ambition that can, in principle, be attained by humans. Spinoza achieves this in two steps: by positing the concept of an additional, third kind of knowledge and by showing that the human mind can, in principle, know everything it encounters in this way. This is all that is needed.

*e) What Explanations of Subjective Experiences
Are, and What They Require*

What have we shown? For Spinoza, subjective experiences are in principle explainable. But this is not all: he also thinks that the epistemological requirements imply that it is a meaningful, realistic project for human beings to seek explanations and sharpen their grasp of them as much as possible. Against this background, let us now finally take a short look at the concept of explanation at stake. What do explanations of subjective experience consist in, according to the model developed in the *Ethics*? What do we know when a subjective experience has been successfully explained? And how is this knowledge related to other bodies of knowledge?

As mentioned in the introduction, the *Ethics* employs no fixed term that would be equivalent to the English “explanation” or the German *erklären*. Even the most relevant term used in this context, namely the verb *intelligere*, is never explicitly discussed.⁶¹ Based on the reconstruction here, we can nonetheless identify some clues as to which aspects Spinoza would emphasize.

1. Earlier, I discussed the preface to Spinoza’s theory of affects. We saw that, for Spinoza, human emotions are primarily a matter of theoretical—rather than practical—considerations.⁶² To explain feelings, we must turn our attention to natural causes, not to rational ones—that is, we should not attempt to rationalize feelings. Moreover, Spinoza’s theory of action is based on the same premises as his psychology and epistemology. Consequently, the concept of reasons—in the sense of genuinely practical causes for which to pursue an action—is quite foreign to his approach. This does not preclude that the considerations guiding us in deciding to act in certain ways may be better or worse. In fact, for Spinoza, rational ideas are those that have been formed with the aid of common notions, and common notions can be used to identify goals that are worth pursuing, so they can lay the foundation for prescriptive propositions. But this is only on account of their theoretical content. We could also say, then, that practical considerations regarding the best course of action can only be rational, according to Spinoza, if they are supported by theoretical insights. It is debatable whether this is satisfactory from an action-theoretical or moral-philosophical point of view. But when it comes

61. This verb is used, e.g., in 3praef, C I, 492; G II, 138.

62. See Part IV, Chapter 13.

to the task of explaining experience, I agree that theoretical considerations should have a certain primacy over practical ones as our experiences are based on events we cannot manipulate, events that are outside our control with regard to both their corporeal and their mental dimension. We certainly have the ability to systematically avoid certain types of affection, but this can be a rational strategy only if we know why and how these affections are harmful to us. Furthermore, it may seem as if we can influence our experience by deciding to interpret certain events in specific ways. So it may seem that, if a stranger bumps into me in the subway, there are good practical reasons to consider this an accident and not an attack; but, ultimately, what we experience in this situation is beyond our control. Erroneous interpretive patterns can certainly be corrected, but this requires a theoretical reflection on the causes affecting our experience. We cannot change our views on what happens simply by deliberation on practical reasons.

2. As I argued in the interpretation of the preamble to Part Two of the *Ethics*, Spinoza distances himself from the deductive method underlying Cartesian logic.⁶³ In contrast to Descartes, he does not subscribe to an epistemological fundamentalism that would require all knowledge to spring from indubitable first concepts. The methodological principle underlying Spinoza's rationalism is not the method of deduction but rather the ideal of comprehensive analysis. One might say that, from a scientific and epistemological point of view, this ideal may be just as problematic as Descartes' approach—but, as far as the task of explaining experience is concerned, it strikes me as quite instructive. According to Spinoza, this task largely consists in a reconstruction of the conceptual content involved in an experience, and this reconstruction, notably, requires a causal analysis of the associative and inferential idea clusters that determine this content. In my view, there is an essentially true insight behind this approach. We can assume that when it comes to explaining subjective experience, a large explanatory role is played by the identification of the concepts by which a subject interprets what is happening to him and the analysis of their semantic relations to other concepts. Regardless of whether or not one embraces the notion of irreducible qualitative content, we can assume that subjective experiences quite often involve conceptual representations of certain things. And we can further assume that those representations have a decisive impact at least on certain dimensions of the qualitative aspect of subjective experience. It is therefore

63. See Part II, Chapter 4.

entirely plausible that the qualitative aspect of an experience can, at least partially, be deciphered by elucidating the conceptual content involved. But Spinoza's special brand of rationalism is instructive in yet another regard: he seems to think that, by elucidating and analyzing the conceptual content inherent in our experience, we will unearth patterns holding ideas together that have a lasting impact on our experience without having been known to us. Thus, even if such an explanation does not grant us access to a new reality by elucidating the concepts we already have, it can generate knowledge of something that is new to us. And this is perfectly plausible. It is possible to reflect on one's own experiences without simply reviewing them—we can also look for correlations that have an impact on our experience. Of course, we may ask ourselves whether anything at all can come from this kind of reflection or whether its success is not a necessarily rather limited one. In fact, we shall see later on that a full explanation of an instance of experience also requires knowledge that *cannot* be acquired through mere reflection. But this does preclude that the causal underpinnings of subjective experience may be illuminated through the analysis of conceptual content.

3. According to Spinoza, exploring the causes of mental states is a rather multifaceted affair. For one thing, the spectrum of possible effective causes is quite broad: associative connections can spring from biographical events but also from cultural and historical conditions. For another, for a mental state to be explained successfully, different types of preexisting knowledge are required. In addition to the patterns that govern our thoughts, we must know numerous historical, cultural, or biographical facts. It would therefore be misleading to consider the task of explaining experience as a purely scientific affair. It certainly involves the exploration of natural laws, but it also includes other kinds of activities, such as the genealogical reconstruction of cultural thought patterns or the therapeutic reflection on one's own biographical imprints.⁶⁴ And it must be emphasized that all these tasks cannot be completed through division of labor—as we saw from our discussion of intuitive knowledge, Spinoza thinks that our epistemic efforts should be directed at attaining complete knowledge of the causes that determine singular things or events. But this can only be done if one and the same person has all the necessary prior knowledge at his or her disposal. Clearly, such a concentration of prior knowledge in a single person is an unrealistic goal—not only would this person have to obtain a plethora of individual bits of knowledge but he or she would also

64. See also Part IV, Chapter 13, § b.

be required to command various *types* of knowledge. From this perspective, a complete explanation of experience is simply impossible. But this does not mean that subjective experiences inherently resist explanation; and it also does not mean that the concept of explanation—the concept that underlies the goal of complete elucidation—is inherently meaningless. At least partially and in response to concrete problems, the integration of insights stemming from different types of knowledge remains conceivable.

4. Recall the comparisons made above between the *Ethics* and Donald Davidson's approach. The result was the following: Spinoza does not simply maintain that propositional attitudes can be rationally understood by a radical interpreter; rather, he holds that the mental is fully intelligible from the point of view of an infinite intellect.⁶⁵ Clearly, this difference with respect to the transcendental requirements that mark the two approaches also affects their respective concepts of explanation. Evidently, Spinoza thinks that explaining subjective experience is not the same as understanding the meaning of the underlying propositional attitudes. His conception is instead derived from the ideal of a maximally precise understanding from a third-person perspective. Now, this reference to the third-person perspective certainly has its problems; after all, when talking of perspective, we are dealing with a metaphor. Only this much is clear: we are dealing with a special kind of epistemic access to an event, a kind of access that distinguishes itself from both the perspective of the experiencing subject and the perspective of a conversation partner who participates in the event, albeit indirectly. In other words, the metaphor of the third-person perspective merely expresses that an event is observed from an external point of view. What constitutes this point of view is left unspecified. This is why the metaphor can be employed in many ways, depending on the context. For instance, it tends to appear when reductive explanations of mental states are at issue. In those discussions, it is used to describe the point of view from which a natural scientist addresses the question of *what it is like* to be in a certain mental state. Yet, this is not what Spinoza has in mind when he maintains that experience is explainable from the standpoint of an infinite intellect. This much is true: like the technique adopted by today's natural scientists, the epistemic technique that Spinoza envisions aims at objectivity. But as we saw earlier, Spinoza's technique involves numerous, heterogeneous bits of knowledge—including those that will be accessible by the experiencing

65. See Part II, Chapter 7.

subject itself (and possibly a participating conversation partner) but not necessarily by a completely uninvolved observer. Thus, Spinoza not only subverts the dichotomy of objective explanation and intersubjective comprehension—he also forbids any epistemological hypostatization of the grammar involving the first, second, and third persons. This is not to say that he would disregard that these perspectives do indeed differ from one another. On the contrary: in a concrete event, the first-, second-, and third-person perspectives are by no means interchangeable; and the differences in perspective must be taken into account if we seek to explain concrete experiences. But, in Spinoza's view, these differences are merely situational and without any impact on the claim that explanations can be more or less objective. If an explanation is insufficient, it is not because it is issued either by the experiencing subject itself or, in the opposite case, by an external observer. In other words, the ideal of objectivity suggested by the notion of infinite intellect is not a matter of an explanation's operating on a merely neutral ground, or its precluding the perspective of subjects as it were, but of its integrating a maximum amount of causal knowledge.

Overall, then, the *Ethics* features a succinct understanding of what constitutes explanations of subjective experience and what makes them successful. Explaining experience is a matter of theoretical rather than practical reflection. It focuses on the causes of—and not the reasons behind—our thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences. For Spinoza, these causes need not be external influences, but they include the concepts that an experience involves, which is why the analysis of our ideas and their interconnections is an important tool to explain experience. And as these ideas and their connections are not simply innate but have a history, an explanation can be successful only if these histories can be traced back to their causal origins. This requires a great amount of prior knowledge, knowledge of vastly different kinds. To explain experience, one must have an understanding of psychological laws and an ethnographic knowledge of culture and history, as well as insights into the biographical conditions under which certain ideas were formed. Consequently, Spinoza's concept of explanation is committed to a particular ideal of objectivity: its chief criterion is not whether we are able to abstract from subjective points of view but whether the understanding it provides us with is apt to integrate previous bits of causal knowledge as comprehensively as possible.

However, there is no theory of knowledge that would correspond to this concept of explanation, and Spinoza furnishes only few methodological rules, aside from the functional principle of the common notions. This is not really that

surprising as he assumes that, when seeking an explanation of a subjective experience, we take some preliminary grasp of it for granted and primarily inquire into its conditions. Thus, to explain experience requires, first and foremost, a philosophical theory of the human mind. It is within this theory that the conditions of possibility for such an explanation must be clarified—and it must also pinpoint those concrete difficulties that will sooner or later be encountered on the path toward an explanation of concrete experiences.

Conclusion

SUCCESSFUL EXPLANATION OF EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

IN THE INTRODUCTION, I described the conviction underlying the whole of Spinoza's *Ethics* as follows: subjective experience is explainable, and its successful explanation is of ethical relevance because it makes us wiser, freer, and happier. The reconstruction has shown what this conviction is based on and which requirements regarding the conception of the mental and the human mind must be fulfilled for it to be true. To this end, I developed a reading of Part Two of the *Ethics* that rejects the claim that Spinoza deduces the human mind from God. Instead, it became clear that Spinoza demonstrates, in a number of steps, that humans and their experiences have something crucial in common with beings in general, namely that they are intelligible or, in other words, explainable. In the process, he makes a proposal as to how two intuitions that are often seen or experienced as contradictory can be reconciled, namely that experience is something irreducibly subjective and that there are more accurate and less accurate explanations of experiences. Spinoza's proposal may be provisional in some respects, but, by and large, it is remarkably consistent.

Before being able to cast Spinoza's account of the human mind as an answer to this problem, there was a significant prerequisite to fulfill: in Part I of this book, I gave a reading of the first part of the *Ethics*, rejecting its alleged status as a rational theology and presenting it instead as a general ontology. In addition, I rejected as erroneous any claim that the *Ethics* advocates any kind of pantheism. According to this reading, to say of a thing that it is a mode is not to consider it as an accident of God but rather to assign it to the realm of those beings that depend categorically (i.e., in their very being) on other things, which is why any given mode also must be explained in reference to those other things. On the basis of

this reading, human subjects and their physical and mental states were revealed, for their part, to be entities that are caused and influenced by external factors. As such, they are accessible through causal reconstruction—yet this reconstruction cannot simply take recourse to the notion of divine causality, invoking God as *deus ex machina*, so to speak. Instead, the reconstruction must take diverse causal relations into account, and, in some cases, it must even consider a whole net of very complex, interconnected relationships.

That something owes its existence to various, possibly interdependent causes does not mean that we could not gain a better understanding of why it exists and why it is the way it is. On the contrary, although the circumstances may sometimes be complex—maybe even unmanageably complex—this does not categorically rule out that we may comprehend how things emerge from other things. Thus, for Spinoza, we must, in principle, be capable of giving a full explanation of everything we encounter—provided we have knowledge of all the relevant premises.

Against this background, the rest of this book provided a reconstruction of Spinoza's account of the human mind. In Parts II to IV, I showed that this account elucidates the prerequisites that must be met before subjective experiences can be counted among the things that are intelligible. Spinoza's account operates on three levels. The first level is addressed in propositions one to seven, where Spinoza settles the ontological relation between thought and being. This relation is twofold. On the one hand, thought is itself a form of being, which means that our thoughts and mental states (in Spinoza's words, our ideas)—as well as what causes them—are possible objects of knowledge. But this is not because they could be reduced to physical entities. Rather, our thoughts are interconnected in a causal network that is generally accessible to us as thinking beings. Thus, from an ontological point of view, thought and extension are features of reality, without it being the case that one feature has an explanatory priority over the other. Yet, on the other hand, the relation between thought and being is just as well characterized by the intentional relation between thoughts and beings. According to Spinoza, this property of thoughts—to be intentional—never misses the mark. At a minimum, ideas enable their holder to be sure that other things outside the self exist. Overall, then, Spinoza's approach in the *Ethics* can best be characterized as a *realist rationalism*. On the one hand, it is designed to counter any skeptical doubts about the intelligibility of things; but, on the other, it also argues against any kind of reductionism, whether idealist or physicalist.

Only afterward does Spinoza discuss what he considers a human mind to be, and he does so in the propositions leading up to 2p13—this is the second level on which Spinoza's account operates. In the third part of the book, I gave a precise analysis of how Spinoza arrives at his concept of mind and identified two

diverging tendencies. On the one hand, Spinoza characterizes the human mind as “just” another idea, thereby abandoning the common view that the mind resides “behind” our thoughts. According to Spinoza, the mind does not reside behind our thoughts because it itself is nothing but a particular thought. On the other hand, Spinoza makes the point that, as a mind, every human being is also characterized by a non-transferable self-knowledge; owing to this self-knowledge, a person knows when she—or the particular physical individual she identifies as her own body—is involved in an event. This allows her to take an individual and privileged stance toward her own emotions, without it being the case that her experiences would therefore constitute something private. Rather, on Spinoza’s account, a subject’s experience is accessible to us precisely to the extent to which the subject itself is revealed to us in its singular physical and mental determination. This is true for our own experiences but also for the experiences of other subjects. To the extent to which we know who or what we are, we are able to comprehend our own experiences. And the same holds true for other subjects: if we know what makes a person into who or what she is, we will also be able to know what that person experiences upon being affected in one way or another.

Overall, the concept of a subject underlying the *Ethics* can best be compared to those approaches in contemporary philosophy of mind that advocate a compatibilism between a first-person authority and a semantic externalism. Such a compatibilism fits well with Spinoza’s political philosophy, which considers human thought and feeling to be highly manipulable while also maintaining that humans could never delegate their judgment to the state. But that is not all: we also find evidence for this kind of compatibilism in the very doctrine that is often cited as the center of Spinoza’s alleged pantheism—namely, in the thesis, advanced in 2p11c, that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect. As we reconstructed this corollary, we saw that its central subject matter is not the relationship between the human and the divine minds but rather the relationship between various contents of human thought and perception. I concluded that Spinoza considers the problem of human perception and its content from a semantic point of view. Thus, when the *Ethics* maintains that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect, it primarily advocates a holism of the mental.

Spinoza’s statements following the physical digression operate on yet another, more concrete level, the third on which his account operates. Here, Spinoza discusses the content of human perception and thought, while frequently referring to claims put forward in the digression. This discussion is relevant to the issue of the explainability of experience because it unveils the mechanism by which individuals endow any event with particular meaning. We can roughly distinguish three steps here. First, in his treatment of imagination, Spinoza outlines a psychological model that accounts for the genesis

and determination of content through the sensation of affections. Second, in his theory of affects, he discusses the laws behind the production of human feelings and, by extension, of the emotional qualities of certain experiences. Finally, in his epistemology, he identifies the requirements that must be met for us to draw more adequate conclusions from our perceptions, helping us to exceed our everyday understanding of what there is and what we ourselves are. Thus, Spinoza approaches the content of human experience in a kind of pincer movement: on the one hand, he describes the processes and discusses the principles underlying our natural perception of things; on the other hand, he draws our attention to possible corrective measures we can adopt to change and improve this very perception.

This dual means of access to the content of human thought is especially important when it comes to the ideas constituting the passions, for whenever we suffer, in an existential sense of the word, we suffer from some emotion or feeling. Thus, the problem posed by inadequate ideas is not simply that of how appropriately they represent things to us. The problem is how, by impacting the affections that condition our perceptions, they contribute to our suffering and limitations. As dependent beings, we are necessarily exposed to affections. What is at stake, then, is nothing less than the possibility of improving our *feelings* through philosophical reflection. As for the aforementioned dual means of access to the contents underlying our mental states, it should, by now, be clear how it relates to this quasi-therapeutic function of philosophical thought. Two things are required: we need to understand how a specific conception of things comes about, and we must also be able to subject this psychological genesis to an epistemological examination. Only then are we capable of identifying projections and other systematic distortions of our perception and recognizing the power they have over our thought.

Clearly, then, there are practical interests behind Spinoza's realist rationalism, only one of which is therapy by means of philosophical reflection (others will be discussed later). Before addressing the practical relevance of Spinoza's approach, however, I want to say a few more words about the conviction that experience is explainable. In the Introduction, I pointed out the advantages of taking this conviction seriously. Compared to contrasting positions, opting for this approach better takes into account our cultural practices of both intersubjective communication of our experiences and individual rationalizing of them by means of reflection. But did I also manage to refute the objections raised today against the claim that experience can be explained? First, there is the problem of how to epistemically access subjective experience, a problem that is frequently expressed in terms of an alleged difference between first- and third-person perspectives; second, there is the issue raised by the notion of qualia, or

of any irreducibly qualitative aspect to experience. How should we, from a philosophical point of view, judge Spinoza's chances of defending his rationalism against these kinds of objections?

The answer is not simple. Taken as such, these objections clearly have not been refuted. And, in fact, I do not think they *can* be refuted, in the strict sense of the word. At most, they can be dissolved or "Quineanized," as Dennett has put it—that is, we can deconstruct their intuitive appeal by questioning their claim to rely on primitive, essential certainties.¹ But the *Ethics* deals with these objections, and the phenomena they invoke, in a different way from that suggested by Dennett. For Spinoza's intention is not *deconstruction* but *reconstruction*, and to reconstruct is to acknowledge certain phenomena first, with the goal of analyzing them later. Spinoza is much more thoughtful in dealing with these phenomena than those philosophers who frequently invoke them to deny that experience can be explained. If we look a little closer, we realize that Spinoza's approach actually confirms many of our everyday intuitions—even though the manner in which he explains them may initially differ from our own.

This becomes quite clear when we consider his views on the issue of our epistemic access to our own experiences (as opposed to experiences had by other subjects): as was shown above, Spinoza thinks that the extent to which we have access to a subject's experiences depends on our knowledge of that subject. This allows for the possibility that we often have much better access to our own experiences than to those made by other subjects. But, conversely, it does not preclude that we can have a better grasp of certain human properties as they occur in others, rather than in ourselves. Thus, the often-felt difference between accessing one's own experiences and experiences had by others is reduced to a question of preexisting knowledge: I simply tend to know more about myself than about other subjects. Consequently, I have a better grasp of who or what I am, compared to who or what other humans are, let alone other kinds of subjects. This is why my own experiences are more easily accessible to me than the experiences of other subjects. But this also makes situations conceivable in which others know better who a person is than that person himself does. In some regards, for instance, attentive parents will know their children better than they know themselves. And they will recognize, for instance, slights unnoticed by their children, slights whose significance will be realized by the children only in retrospect. This is, of course, not to say that the same parents could not unwittingly injure their children in some way themselves, owing to their ignorance of some of their children's properties.

1. See Dennett 1997.

Spinoza's approach, then, even though it maintains that experience is explainable, also gives a lot of credit to lines of thought apparently designed to contradict this claim. This becomes clear once we look at it in detail and consider all its implications. We will find that this claim—that experience can, in principle, be fully explained—is joined by the insight that fully explaining an experience requires a lot of preparation and is, overall, a very ambitious undertaking—so ambitious, in fact, that it can barely ever be completed. But it is crucial to note that this insight does not lead Spinoza to correct his fundamental conviction that experience is explainable.

So, what about the question posed above: which tools does Spinoza place at our disposal to combat the objections raised today against the claim that experience can be explained? We can answer this question as follows: rather than *refuting* these objections, Spinoza's realist rationalism manages to *withstand* them. And this makes sense, seeing as the claim that experience is explainable does not raise the prospect of explaining it outright but merely questions the legitimacy of a skepticism about the issue. Conversely, a realist rationalism as Spinoza envisions it is well aware of the fact that our present knowledge is always preliminary; it therefore leaves a lot of room for reasonable doubt when it comes to specific answers, which also means that it enables us to resist usurpatory interpretations, a point of particular importance for his political theory. Yet, this does not invalidate the realist expectation that, when we seek to understand subjective experience, there are explanations that are better or worse, or more or less successful. A rationalism claiming that subjective experience can be explained, then, retains its philosophical priority over alternative approaches precisely as long as it manages to navigate the narrow path between a naive epistemic optimism and a skeptical epistemic pessimism.

Before bringing this book to a close, I would like to address one final point, which, although exceeding the scope of my investigation here, is nonetheless crucial for the overall philosophical profile of Spinoza's approach: if explanations of experience are, in fact, successful, what exactly is their practical relevance? I shall refrain here from evaluating Spinoza's naturalist ethics—as a post-Kantian reader, I have a few reservations in this regard. But to do it justice, we would have to discuss his conception of ethics, including his concepts of good and bad, in their historical contexts, and we would also have to analyze how he justifies the moral or prudential maxims articulated in the *Ethics*. This would require yet another comprehensive study, comparable in length to the current book, since Spinoza's view of these issues is once again more differentiated and refined than commonly believed.² But even setting aside such an examination, we are able to

2. See Frankena 1975, Jarrett 2002, and Schnepf 2000 and 2008 for a detailed account of Spinoza's meta-ethics. Note that, since the original publication of this book in German,

see, independently, why Spinoza thinks that successful explanations of subjective experience make us wiser, freer, and happier.

First, I must mention one peculiarity: although Spinoza allows for only *one* highest good, namely the knowledge of God, his practical philosophy reveals many different paths toward a good life. In the *Ethics* alone—disregarding Spinoza’s remarks about meta-ethics—we can distinguish three different perspectives from which a practical philosophy is being pursued. First, Spinoza formulates and derives numerous maxims as to how to conduct a prudent life; a summary of these can be found in the postscript to Part Four, under the heading *ratio recta vivendi*, or *the right way of living*. Second, the *Ethics* develops a *conception of philosophical therapy*, which promises *liberation from negative affects*; here, Spinoza presents various mental remedies against the affects (*remedia affectuum*). And finally, in the latter half of Part Five, we encounter various theses addressing the question of *human blessedness*.³

These three perspectives point toward different dimensions of a good life, dimensions that cannot be reduced to one another. It is one thing to act rationally toward my own needs and those of others; it is another thing to overcome the neurotic imprints of my own affective history; and it is yet another to reach happiness in the emphatic sense conveyed by the words “blessedness” (*beatitudo*) and “salvation” (*salus*). This is not to say that these dimensions of good living could not complement each other or assist each other in becoming reality. Following the maxims of the right way of living will give me a better purchase on my own affective history, which, in turn, will help me to satisfy my desire for happiness. Conversely, people who are in tune with their own affective history will be better equipped to deal rationally with their own and others’ needs.

But what about the issue of explaining experience successfully—how does it factor into these three dimensions of a good life? Generally speaking, it is clear that Spinoza, in his remarks about all three dimensions of a good life, goes back to the question of how experience is constituted, a question he had answered previously. But, in each case, he emphasizes something different and draws different connections. Let’s begin with his conception of the right way of living. The first thing that matters here is the insight into the fundamental ontological limitation

Spinoza’s ethical theory has attracted a lot more attention. See, e.g., Le Buffe 2010 and Kisner 2013, as well as the collection by Kisner and Youpa 2014.

3. Note that these different perspectives correspond nicely with another passage from the *Ethics*. The notion of the *ratio recta vivendi* is mainly discussed in Part Four, and the *remedia affectuum* is the subject matter of the first half of Part Five, while the second half addresses the issue of the eternity of the mind. For detailed and careful divisions between different parts of Spinoza’s ethical theory, see also Garrett 1996b and Bennett 1984.

of human existence and its impact on our experience—a condition conveyed by the claim that existing, for humans, also means being dependent on external things and factors.⁴ But knowledge of the psychology of emotions is a key factor as well because it helps us comprehend the specific interplay between various types of affects, which is important for the purpose of regulating both one's own affectivity and one's relationships to others. Among the insights granted in this fashion are claims such as that “hate can never be good”⁵ and that “minds . . . are conquered not by arms, but by love and nobility.”⁶

It is thus in the form of general maxims, occasionally referred to as “dictates of reason,” that these kinds of insights—insights gained through the common notions⁷—make their way into Spinoza's conception of the right way of living. But note that these maxims are not simply conveyed and recommended to the reader—they have a systematic basis in the theoretical parts of the *Ethics*. This is important since, in the preface to Part Three, Spinoza offers a derisive critique of moralist and rhetorical manuals that deal in a similar way with ideas relating to the right way of living. If Spinoza's own list of precepts distinguishes itself from such guides, it is not so much because of its content but because of the systematic justification of that content. What the *Ethics* has to offer by way of advice is not especially different from, say, Gracián's aphorisms—at least as far as concrete life experience and intuition are concerned.⁸ But Spinoza's catalogue of maxims is grounded on his theory of affects, while the entire section is informed by the claim that humans are ontologically dependent on external factors. This

4. See, e.g., 4p3: “The force by which a man perseveres in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes” (C I, 548; G II, 212). This proposition explicates 4ax, according to which “[t]here is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed” (C I, 547; G II, 210). One might wonder why Spinoza articulates this tenet in the form of an axiom as it is already contained in his ontological terminology. I presume that Spinoza alludes here to Hobbes' famous dictum that even “the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others” (see Hobbes 1991a, 87). The importance of Hobbes for Spinoza's social philosophy has been emphasized by Macherey 1997b, 49.

5. See 4p45: “Hate can never be good” (C I, 571; G II, 243).

6. See 4app11: “Minds, however, are conquered not by arms, but by love and nobility” (C I, 589; G II, 269).

7. See Bartuschat 1992a, 179ff. for the argumentative functioning of the dictates of reason.

8. In his discussion of Spinoza's concept of *ingenium*, Moreau 1994a, 396–7, has argued that Spinoza was influenced by the Spanish humanists of the sixteenth century. In fact, Spinoza owned not only copies of several literary works of the Spanish *siglo d'oro* but also Gracián's *Criticon*. See Walther 1998, 266. Whether or not he also knew Gracián's *Oráculo Manual y Arte de Prudencia* is not clear, however.

fundamentally changes the character of his views. His aim is not only to provide us with witty and clever aphorisms but to put forward a theoretically grounded concept of prudential wisdom that is the only means of achieving a generous attitude toward the emotions. This is because, in terms of argument, Spinoza's precepts of reason are deeply rooted in his theoretical philosophy, such that his practical philosophy can completely forgo any kind of special moralist emphasis.⁹

Let's now turn our attention to the second dimension of a good life. How does success in explaining experience help us to realize human freedom or, more precisely, *to liberate the mind from its negative affects*? Here, too, insights from the preceding parts of the *Ethics*—insights regarding the conditions of human experience—are a decisive prerequisite. But, in contrast to Part Five, Spinoza's ontology and his psychology of emotions no longer take center stage; the emphasis is now on epistemology and cognitive psychology as they are discussed in the latter half of Part Two. Even though affects can be conquered only by other affects—a point made more than once by Spinoza—liberating oneself from one's own negative affects requires a targeted cognitive response to the thoughts and representations that accompany those affects.

Concretely speaking, the following two assumptions matter most. First, Spinoza generally thinks that the character of a singular affective event is transformed by our understanding of it. If we have gained full knowledge of an emotion, it does not lose its emotional quality, but, rather than being an involuntary impulse, it is now an expression of our mental vitality. In Spinoza's words, it is no longer a *passion* but rather an *action* of the mind.¹⁰ In psychoanalytical terms, we could also say that by understanding the origins of certain emotions we may overcome the neurotic repetition compulsion. This prospect—the prospect of being liberated from inner compulsions—forms the theoretical horizon for Spinoza's doctrine of freedom, and this remains valid even in cases of partial, incomplete knowledge.

Second, Spinoza thinks that by structuring my thoughts through reflection I can prevent myself from being swayed by affections—in comparison to someone who does not engage in this kind of structuring. This does not imply that an affect must be fully understood because we are dealing with a kind of cognitive training. As we learn from Spinoz, this training can incorporate the rules for the right way of living (developed in Part Four), as well as the insights needed for their justification. Let's assume we realize that many seemingly hostile reactions

9. See also my exposition in Renz 2005.

10. See James 1997 for the significance of this distinction for the discussion of the emotions in seventeenth-century philosophy.

toward us express the aggressor's natural needs and are not essentially directed at us. Once we realize that, we will be less inclined to consider this behavior a personal insult, which means that we will also be less inclined to be angry at the person behaving in this way.

In this part of his practical philosophy, Spinoza thus proposes a conception of philosophical therapy intended to liberate the mind from painful affects by combining psychoanalytic intuitions with cognitive behavioral measures.¹¹ Naturally, the crucial theoretical basis for this therapeutic concept is to be found in his account of the human mind, which argues that experience is explainable. But on top of that, the very process of explaining experience is itself part of the therapy. We cannot underestimate this, especially if we are interested in a liberal reading of Spinoza's political philosophy.¹² Spinoza assumes that people become freer and less manipulable if they organize their own thoughts on the basis of rational knowledge. Without this assumption, he could not expect that the concepts supplied by the *Ethics* increase the reader's political maturity, rather than merely the efficiency of governmental measures. Crucially, by contrast, Spinoza's practical philosophy, including his political theory, relies on the self-knowledge that subjects acquire for themselves.

Now to the final point, the question regarding human blessedness or contentment. Let me say, first, that Spinoza takes the human need for happiness very seriously but without making any metaphysical concessions. This is important, especially considering his theory that the mind is eternal: when Spinoza says that the human mind is eternal, he does not mean that the soul is immortal. On the contrary, it is no accident that the *Ethics* talks about eternity instead of immortality.¹³ There is no claim that the mind subsists after death; what Spinoza proposes, instead, is an epistemic option. The mind is, in a certain regard and under certain conditions, eternal: this must be construed not as a statement about the mind's ontological status but as an epistemological claim about the truth and certainty of its cognitions.¹⁴ What Spinoza envisions when invoking

11. See also my discussion of Cook in Part IV, Chapter 14, § c, footnote 37.

12. Whether or not Spinoza really advocated a form of political liberalism is, of course, the subject of an ongoing controversy.

13. The term *immortalitas* never appears in the *Ethics*, although it is mentioned in the *Short Treatise*, which contains a whole chapter entitled "Van des Ziels Onserfelykheid" (C I, 140–1, G I, 102–3). That this is no accident has been shown by both Moreau 1994a, 534ff., and Nadler 2001. Despite this philological fact, Nadler interprets Spinoza's doctrine of the mind's eternity as answering the question of personal immortality.

14. Epistemological readings of the doctrine of the mind's eternity have been defended by, e.g., Allison 1987, 171ff.; Yovel 1990; Moreau 1994a, 539–40; and Nadler 2001, 115ff., and 2006, 266ff. Nadler also argued that Spinoza was influenced by Maimonides and Gersonides in this

the eternity of the mind is a certain kind of knowledge; and if the reconstruction I give here of his concept of mind is correct, this knowledge is knowledge of a human individual, *acquired by the individual herself*.¹⁵ A mind is eternal if the human being to whom this mind belongs acquires full knowledge of its singular essence—which we have shown to mean: if it fully recognizes itself in its complete determinedness.

But what does this mean for the question of human blessedness? How does complete knowledge of one's own singular essence relate to one's need for happiness? In other words, where does the experience of blessedness come from, the blessedness Spinoza promises, at the end of the *Ethics*, for those who intuit themselves as well as other things?

In this context, we must first point out that knowledge, for Spinoza, and intuitive knowledge especially, is in and by itself accompanied by a feeling of happiness or, more precisely, contentedness with oneself, *acquiescentia in se ipso*.¹⁶ This is because knowledge-seeking humans are fully active and no longer determined by external influences. In the act of intuiting, then, humans experience themselves at the height of their own sovereignty.¹⁷ It seems to me, though, as if this interpretation—the interpretation of knowledge as an *action*—is not enough fully to grasp what Spinoza has in mind here. If this—that, in generating intuitive knowledge, we experience our unlimited power of action—were all that made explaining experience conducive to happiness, we could simply spend our days solving mathematical equations, and we would be just as happy as if we were engaged in probing into the conditions of our own experience. For even if we only draw correlations between purely rational objects, we perform acts of knowledge, which in turn makes us feel our power of action. But, apparently, Spinoza thinks that, with regard to our happiness, recognizing *our own* singular essence is of special importance. So what, then, has this knowledge to do with human happiness?

To answer this question, let us recall something pointed out during the discussion of Spinoza's account of imagination: Spinoza considers human representations

respect. Matheron also defends an epistemological reading, yet, due to the structuralist background of his approach, his interpretation nonetheless results in a statement about the ontological status of the mind (2011, 303–4).

15. In contrast to what Nadler suggests, we can preclude therefore that Spinoza adopts here an Averroist attitude toward the issue. For a critique of readings of Spinoza along these lines, see Moreau 1994a, 535. For the relation between Spinoza and the Averroism debate, see also Part III, Chapter 10, § d, footnote 47.

16. Curley translates this as “self-esteem” (see, e.g., 4p52, C I575). I prefer “contentedness” here because translating it thus makes its contribution to our happiness more obvious.

17. See also Bartuschat 1992a, 386, and Kisser 2011, 292.

and thoughts to be a fundamentally affirmative activity. Representing something means affirming it, unless other ideas counteract this affirmation. Every idea is affirmed in this manner, regardless of its representative content. Whether we imagine an isosceles triangle, the tree outside our nursery decades ago, or the mischievous smile of a late friend—in all these ideas, affirmation plays an important role. In Spinoza's view, whenever the human mind has ideas and thoughts, it tends to consider them expressions of something real. Moreover, this tendency to affirm does not diminish as the mind's ideas become more adequate; it merely becomes more focused, as it is then directed at one specific aspect of an imagined thing. For instance, when I think of that mischievous smile on my late friend's face, the thought is not removed by acknowledging the fact that he is dead; instead, I now understand the smile as belonging to his person and in the meaning it had for me when he was still alive—and, as such, it is also affirmed. Something similar holds true for the ideas we have of ourselves: whatever we know about ourselves, we affirm, and, to the same extent as we can discern ourselves from what we are not, the more decided our affirmation becomes.

Against this background, we can conjecture that Spinoza's vision of human happiness has a lot to do with *affirming one's own person without ambivalence*. Let us also recall that the essences of singular things were said to have a history. Thus, if human happiness, for Spinoza, consists in knowing the essences of singular things—and, above all, ourselves—then this must include, rather than exclude, all the biographical and historical influences on our being. This in turns implies an affirmation of these influences. But does this not contradict the idea that this knowledge is an eternal truth? I don't think so. Spinoza's notion of eternity derives from the notion of necessity, and it perfectly well allows not only that the object of an eternal truth exists in time but also that it has become, over time, what it is now: there are eternal truths about a thing's becoming. Moreover, note that when Spinoza advocates the possibility of intuitive insight into one's own singular essence, he does not commit himself to some notion of preformation or predestination. Affirming your own essence, therefore, is a far cry from fatalistically resigning yourself to your fate.

Obviously, if there is knowledge that results in our affirming our own person unequivocally, it would make us content and independent. But does it also make us *happy*, in the emphatic sense evoked by such terms as "blessedness" and, especially, "salvation"? Spinoza seems to think so, given that, in 5p36, he identifies this contentedness with human blessedness and salvation, placing the root of all three in the intellectual love of God. But this raises the question of whether he promises more than he can deliver, considering that his ontology features a God devoid of any personhood. It is plausible that intuitive knowledge of one's own singular essence can be the point of origin for an eternal love the human mind feels for

God or nature. Considering the philosophical tradition, it also makes sense that this would be at the root of blessedness or beatitude. But that God would also love the human mind, if only through the detour of a divine self-love—this, in the context of the general ontological reconstruction of Spinoza's metaphysics given in this book, is no longer a meaningful statement.

This failure is no accident. It seems to me that there is a gap between what Spinoza *can* do, on the basis of his realist rationalism (and we have seen that he can do a lot), and what he *wants* to do in terms of his practical philosophy. Judging by the final pages of the *Ethics*, this gap is rather vexing, for what Spinoza wants is nothing less than to demonstrate that even our *religious* desire for salvation can be fulfilled by a purely philosophical ethics. This comes at a price, in that he must force his God—understood by him as a philosophical principle—to do what only a personal God can accomplish, namely to love. This leaves open the possibility that the intuition underlying his practical philosophy is largely correct. Successful explanations of experience make us wiser, freer, and happier. They put a lot of things at our disposal to use in leading a better life. And perhaps when we find these things, we experience them as a gift. But do successful explanations of experience also quench the religious desire for salvation, as promised by the final pages of the *Ethics*? I have my doubts.

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