

BEYOND THE GEOMETRICAL METHOD
NATURE, NECESSITY, AND NIHILISM IN
SPINOZA'S PHILOSOPHY

by

TORIN DOPPELT

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of Spinoza's method.

I begin with Spinoza's own views on method. I show that he begins with a largely Cartesian outlook, while acknowledging a debt to Bacon, and adopts a monistic framework which consists of three parts: distinguishing true perceptions from false ones, prioritizing the whole over the parts, and avoiding wearying the mind with useless things.

In Chapter 2 I argue for two theses: First, that there is no clear understanding of what Spinoza's method is, nor of how precisely it fits together with its antecedents. Second, I argue that, while prior accounts have often rightly noted the philosophical debts Spinoza owes to Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, and others, Spinoza's own view has not been, and indeed cannot be, clearly understood through these previous methodologies.

In Chapter 3 I argue that Spinoza is committed to two interpretive principles: Meaning Requires Use (*MRU*), and Meaning Requires Knowledge (*MRK*). I suggest that these principles can usefully be applied to our interpretation of Spinoza himself.

Next, I employ a database-driven reconstruction of the structure of the *Ethics* to argue in Chapter 4 that uncited elements constitute a problem for the logical interpretation of Spinoza's method, which holds that the geometrical order of the text

is intended to represent the order of nature. I also argue that even if we do not hold to a strictly logical interpretation of the geometrical order, there is still a problem of interpretation of Spinoza's *Ethics* that arises precisely because of his use of that order.

Chapter 5 develops the data-driven approach I have taken in the analysis of the geometrical order to arrive at a rather exhaustive account of what appear to be intentional philosophical endpoints of Spinoza's system, and which can thereby be analyzed for consistency and cogency, and thereby illuminate the core doctrines of Spinoza's philosophy.

In light of the foregoing analysis, in Chapter 6, I consider the threat of nihilism that falls out of Spinoza's necessitarianism, which underlies his method, and try to determine how Spinoza's *Ethics* can be an ethics after all.

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List of Abbreviations

- 1-5 Part of the *Ethics*
- CM* *Cogitata Metaphysica* — *Metaphysical Thoughts*
- Ep.* *Epistolae* — *Letters*
- KV* *Korte Verhandeling* — *Short Treatise*
- PPC* *Principia Philosophiae Cartesianae* — *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*
- TdIE* *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* — *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*
- TP* *Tractatus Politicus* — *Political Treatise*
- TTP* *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* — *Theological-Political Treatise*
- A Axiom
- D Definition
- d Demonstration (always following a proposition numeral)
- DA Definition of the Affects
- GDA General Definition of the Affects
- L Lemma
- P Proposition
- PS Postulate
- s Scholium

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Introduction

Spinoza is, among the great classical thinkers, one of the least accessible because of his rigid adherence to the geometric form of argumentation, in which form he obviously saw somewhat of an insurance against fallacies. In fact, Spinoza thereby made it difficult for the reader who all too quickly loses patience and breath before he reaches the heart of the philosopher's ideas.¹

—*Albert Einstein*

Spinoza is a methodical thinker. Whatever else is said about his philosophy, it is undeniable that there is a quintessentially Spinozistic way to approach things. There seems to be something unique and powerful about Spinoza's particular way of thinking, about any subject matter, in accordance with a certain and determinate order, that ultimately leads to consequences which number among the most notorious in the history of philosophy.²

Certain questions naturally arise when one begins to think about Spinoza's method. Here are just a few: What, exactly, is Spinoza's method? Is there only one method, or

1. Runes, *Spinoza Dictionary*, Foreword.

2. E.g., Daisy Radner writes that "Malebranche objected that Spinoza's 'atheistic' system rests upon a confusion between extension and the idea of extension." (Radner, "Malebranche's Refutation of Spinoza," 113) And also consider John Aubrey's now famous remark on the reaction of Hobbes: "When Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* first came out [1670], Mr. Edmund Waller sent it to my lord of Devonshire and desired him to send him word what Mr. Hobbes said of it. Mr. H. told his lordship:- *Ne judicate ne judicemini*. He told me he had cut thorough him a barre's length, for he durst not write so boldly." (Aubrey, "*Brief lives*", *chiefly of contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the years 1669 & 1696*; 357) In the final chapter of this dissertation I return to thoughts such as these in order to piece together Spinoza's notoriety in virtue of his conclusions with his equally notorious philosophical methodology.

does his approach to philosophy involve multiple methods? Is Spinoza's method distinct from those of his acknowledged influences or is there some overlap (and if so, how much is there)? Is Spinoza's use of the geometrical order of presentation a necessary, or intrinsically connected, manifestation of his methodological commitments, or are these separable? What is the importance of method for Spinoza? Finally, supposing that we arrive at satisfactory answers to at least some of these questions, what is the usefulness, if any, of Spinoza's method for us?

The scholarship on Spinoza is remarkably consistent in recognizing: that there is something called 'Spinoza's method'; that this method is a notable, or even very important, feature of Spinoza's work; that it seems to have something to do with geometry and the axiomatic exposition of the *PPC* and the *Ethics*. Here, alas, the consistency ends.

There is relatively scant material focused solely on Spinoza's method. Historically, major works that consider Spinoza's method in detail are: Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza (Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata)*; Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*; Guérout, *Spinoza*; Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*; Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*. These works are all influential enough to warrant serious consideration; however, as Curley's title—*Behind the Geometrical Method*—(itself a nod to Wolfson) indicates, much of the work on Spinoza's method has been concerned with getting around the geometrical order in which Spinoza's work is notoriously clad.

My aim, however, is to present an interpretation of Spinoza which does not aim to go *behind* Spinoza's geometrical method and the Euclidean order, but rather strives to go beyond it, in part by going through it. By this I mean that this dissertation is not

solely a historical study of the motives which underlie Spinoza's method—though I do not deny that these are important—but rather a philosophical study of the character and implications of the method itself.

In my view, the two most important works focused on Spinoza's methodology and method in English are: Hubbeling, *Spinoza's Methodology*; and Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*.³ These works are a marked improvement of the scholarship on Spinoza's methodology; however, they fail to address a number of important features of Spinoza's geometrical texts. I shall aim to show that these features, once understood and capitalized upon, will help us to better understand Spinoza and what he may still have to offer us.

Most introductions to Spinoza acknowledge the importance of Spinoza's method (especially with respect to the *Ethics* and its geometrical rendering), but these discussions usually do not travel much beyond staking a claim as to whether this method is integral to the understanding of Spinoza or not. There has also been some discussion of the fact that Spinoza's earliest work, the *TdIE*, is, as Curley puts it, “a short, difficult, but fascinating discourse on method,”⁴ clearly evoking the connection to Spinoza's immediate predecessor, Descartes. Consideration of the early work, however, has shed surprisingly little light on the way in which the mature Spinoza's philosophy (in the *Ethics*, *TTP*, *TP*) is understood, methodologically speaking. This is, to some extent, a technological problem.⁵

Spinoza scholarship has only very recently begun to creep forward into the digital

3. There is also an updated chapter on method from Garrett in Della Rocca, *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*. Garrett's chapter focuses on a puzzle concerning the acquisition of definitions. I consider a challenging version of this puzzle in Chapter 1.

4. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 3.

5. Exceptions to this are Steinberg, “Method and the structure of knowledge in Spinoza,” and the aforementioned Garrett, “The Virtues of Geometry,” which I shall consider in greater detail in later chapters.

era, and the methods of digital text analysis are not well-understood as tools of the trade for historians of philosophy. Spinoza's work is, however, highly programmatic, and in the case of the *Ethics*, especially amenable to some straightforward computational analysis. Such analysis, though primitive, will play a role in the argument of this dissertation, as I attempt to build and improve upon the groundwork laid by Hubbeling and Garrett.

Following Curley, in undertaking my task, I acknowledge that “it remains, as Koyré also remarks, highly significant that Spinoza should begin a treatise on method by reflecting on the true good.”⁶ Why is this highly significant? We should not simply want to know what Koyré thought, but rather what reasons Spinoza—or, rather, the text and its historical and intellectual context—may provide for thinking it is so. My primary purpose is not to interrogate Spinoza's early work on method, but rather to investigate the importance of method in Spinoza's philosophy in a systematic way, with particular emphasis on the mature works that embody the culmination of Spinoza's efforts. With this in mind, the acknowledgement that it is highly significant that Spinoza begins discussing method with an axiological tenor is an admission that Spinoza's methodological approach, just as much as his ethical intent, occupies a foundational place in his philosophy. In order to determine why it is significant that method is joined with the Good, it is important to get a sense of who and what we are talking about.

Scholars have reconstructed many Spinozas, many of whom appear contradictory, or at least deeply in tension with one-another: ‘God-intoxicated’ or ‘obsessed’ as

6. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 6.

Novalis would have it,⁷ or an atheist;⁸ Wolfson's 'rabbinico-scholastic',⁹ Bennett's field-physicist,¹⁰ and Della Rocca's arch-rationalist;¹¹ and many more intermediaries and alternatives besides—too many to mention.

This dissertation focuses on method because it is from this perspective that Spinoza's philosophy displays its most distinctive character. A proper understanding of Spinoza's method exposes his deepest philosophical commitments, i.e., to the unity and necessity of Nature and everything in it. Indeed, I shall argue that Spinoza's view of Nature (including human beings) requires his method because the conceptual necessity of the method tracks the causal necessity of nature. They are one and the same thing conceived now as concepts, now as natural things. This methodological requirement does not necessarily imply that Spinoza's philosophy requires the strict Euclidean presentation of the *Ethics*. It does not. But the methodological implications of Spinoza's commitment to necessity do tell us something about that exposition. Likewise, the details of that majestic edifice also tell us something about Spinoza's method.¹²

Let me offer a few brief words about what will and will not be treated in this

7. To cite Bennett's rendition of this oft-quoted claim: "If he was not 'drunk with God' (as the poet Novalis said), he was obsessed with God." (Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 35).

8. These days, those who make this claim are usually clear that this characterization, of course, depends on what is meant by 'God', or by 'atheist', but it is a plausible reading of Spinoza's philosophy, though Spinoza himself would have denied the label. In the past, the epithet was far less carefully used.

9. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*.

10. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*.

11. On this reading, see especially Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, but also Förster and Melamed, *Spinoza and German Idealism*.

12. A worry about circularity may arise here, if the geometrical structure of the *Ethics* is conflated with the geometrical method in which Spinoza orders his thinking. This potential for conflation is an undercurrent that runs through this dissertation. It is avoided here because I am not suggesting that the *justification* for the exposition is to be found solely in the ontology, nor that we are justified in a certain reading of the method solely from an interpretation of the exposition or the ontology. What I will argue is simply that the structural features of Spinoza's *Ethics* reveal aspects of his philosophy which have until now not been fully appreciated.

dissertation. In the broadest terms, I will treat some historical antecedents of Spinoza's method, but these will not necessarily be those that are known to have been read by Spinoza, nor those that necessarily had a direct influence on his thinking. Such connections have been well-documented by a great deal of scholars. My purpose is, rather, to provide a sense of the methodological currents which were in the air in Spinoza's day. The Zabarellan, Hobbesian, Baconian, and Cartesian methods were all influential enough to merit contrasting them with Spinoza's developments. I consider Descartes' *Regulae* rather than the much more well known *Principles* and *Discourse* for a very similar reason. Connections between these latter two works and Spinoza are well-documented. I do not presume that Spinoza read the *Regulae*, but I shall endeavour to show that the method presented there nevertheless offers useful insights into aspects of Spinoza's method.

In addition, I do not cover any debt Spinoza may owe to the Stoics, or neo-Stoics. This is not because I doubt that there is any such debt. There is.¹³ It may be that there are methodological similarities between Spinoza and the Stoics, especially with respect to monism and causal necessity, but such a study goes far beyond the scope of this dissertation. I leave it for another time.

Finally, I do not consider in much detail the historical, social, or psychological causes of Spinoza's methodological commitments. There are, undoubtedly, worthwhile

13. My doctoral advisor, Jon Miller, has written what I consider to be the definitive text comparing and contrasting the systems of Spinoza and the Stoics, in his *Spinoza and the Stoics*.

investigations into what made Spinoza think the way that he did.¹⁴ In this dissertation, however, my aim is not to uncover Spinoza's true motivations, or to expose the true historical influences. As the title of this work suggests, my aim is to go forward, *beyond* the geometrical method, first by understanding what it is, and then by finding its core.

In Chapter 1 I consider Spinoza's own conception of method from the earliest stages of his philosophical development to his mature works. I argue that in his earliest works, Spinoza begins with a largely Cartesian outlook, while acknowledging a counterintuitive debt to Bacon.¹⁵ Furthermore, I show that Spinoza adopts a monistic, but tripartite framework which consists in distinguishing true perceptions from false ones, prioritizing the whole over the parts,¹⁶ and in avoiding wearying the mind with useless things. I further show that while conceptually more refined, Spinoza's view remains essentially unchanged in his mature work.

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the major historical surveys which have attempted to situate Spinoza's method amongst its historical forebears. I argue for two theses in this chapter: first, that the diversity of these accounts suggest that

14. E.g., Spinoza's notoriously dismal views concerning the nature of women ought to be treated seriously, especially if these views are taken by Spinoza to follow from his methodological commitments. For my own part, I do not think that Spinoza's philosophy requires misogyny, and indeed, I think it can be used to mount a powerful opposition to such wretched ideologies. This is not the place to mount a sustained defense of this view, but let me suggest that if Spinoza were alive today, he would be confronted by ample empirical evidence that would necessitate a rethinking of many of his beliefs about the world of experience (where passionate, living, interactions between human beings take place).

15. It is surprising to think that Spinoza attempted to utilize both Descartes' strongly rationalist, *a priori* method and the empiricist, natural-scientific method of Bacon's *Novum Organum*. I consider this in detail in this chapter.

16. Yitzhak Melamed argues that there is a sense in which "In Spinoza's tradition, parts are more fundamental than wholes, so the true idea of our essence can contain more fundamental true ideas, such as a true idea of God." (Melamed, *The Young Spinoza*, 85) I do not intend to deny this view. My claim is about the epistemic priority of ideas, rather than the mereological priority of parts and wholes within Nature.

there is no clear understanding of what Spinoza's method is, nor of how precisely it fits together with its antecedents. Second, I argue that while other scholars have often rightly noted philosophical debts Spinoza owes to Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, and others, Spinoza's own view has not been, and indeed cannot be, fully or clearly understood through these previous methodologies.

In Chapter 3, building in part on the account of Spinoza's conception of method developed in Chapter 1 and the clarification of issues surrounding interpretations of Spinoza's method in its historical context, I turn to Spinoza's accounts of language and meaning, especially as concerns the interpretation of texts (whether scripture or philosophy). I argue that Spinoza is committed to two interpretive principles: Meaning Requires Use (*MRU*), and Meaning Requires Knowledge (*MRK*). The first of these applies to all potentially meaningful locutions. The second applies just in case the use of a word or phrase is obscured or indiscernible. I suggest that these principles are instantiations of the fourth axiom of *Ethics I*, "knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of its cause." I argue that these principles should be applied to our interpretation of Spinoza's own words. This suggestion is developed with a particular eye toward obscure material in Spinoza's philosophy in the following chapter.

Next, I address a serious issue with the geometrical order of the *Ethics*, namely, the existence of what I call 'idle material', i.e., uncited elements of the text. I argue that these elements constitute a problem for the logical interpretation of Spinoza's method, which holds that the geometrical order of the text is intended to represent the order of nature. Furthermore, I also argue that because of the theory of meaning to which Spinoza subscribes, and which I argue governs how we ought to proceed

in interpreting him, even if we do not hold to a strictly logical interpretation of the geometrical order, there is still a problem of interpretation of Spinoza's *Ethics* that arises precisely because of his use of that order.

Chapter 5 is a continued discussion of idle material, in which I consider a great benefit of approaching the text of the *Ethics* in this way (which accompanies the associated problem of meaning addressed in Chapter 4): the geometrically idle propositions provide a powerful means to both collate and analyse many of Spinoza's most important claims. I employ the results of the data-driven approach I have taken in the analysis of the geometrical order to arrive at a rather exhaustive account of what appear to be intentional philosophical endpoints, i.e., ultimate conclusions (not used for any other purpose), in Spinoza's system, and which can thereby be analyzed for cogency and consistency. I argue that these sixty-eight theses constitute the core doctrines of the *Ethics*. Many of these are concerned with Hate, and they all to some degree evoke the necessity of Nature.

From this analysis, in Chapter 6 I consider the question of how Spinoza's *Ethics* can be an ethics at all, which flows naturally from the interpretation of the method that emerges over the course of the dissertation. The question of how the philosophy of the *Ethics*, or Spinozism more generally, could constitute an ethics arises in part because Spinoza's philosophy has been understood to be straightforwardly, and methodically, antithetical to many other systems of ethics. The threat of nihilism posed by Spinoza's necessitarianism makes it all the more difficult to reconcile his focus on Hate and other ethical implications that are illuminated by the analysis of the previous chapter. This view rests in part on the necessitarian, naturalistic, and uncompromising nature of Spinoza's thought.

The geometrical method and the Euclidean order have played no small role in motivating this negative view of Spinoza's ethical and political philosophy. I argue that my reading of Spinoza's method provides us with not just a clearer picture of the conclusions of Spinoza's *Ethics*, including its ethical and political doctrines, but also a better sense of why Spinoza held the views he did, and for what reasons we may want, or indeed be required by necessity, to follow him.

Chapter 1

Spinoza's Conception of Method

No doubt everyone now sees that this method requires no light beyond the natural light itself. For the nature and excellence of this light consists above all in this: that by legitimate principles of inference it deduces and infers things obscure from things known, or given as known. Our method requires nothing else.¹

—*Benedictus de Spinoza*

1.1 Introduction

What does Spinoza himself say about method? There is an important tripartite distinction between:

- (a) What Spinoza the person believed about method,
- (b) what Spinoza wrote about method, and
- (c) what Spinoza's method actually is, in his philosophy as we have it.

I make no claims about (a) besides admitting that there is a sense in which all of (b) is probably included in (a). The distinction between (b) and (c) is more fraught, and is not always clear. I begin this dissertation by carefully reconstructing (b), with the

1. *TTP VII* (III/112)

principle that an understanding of (c) requires a good grasp of (b). For, with both of these in hand we can better determine where the two part ways.

First, consider Spinoza's response to Johannes Bouwmeester, who had asked,

whether there is, or could be, a Method which would enable us to proceed, without either obstruction or weariness, in thinking about the most excellent things? Or whether our minds, like our bodies, are also subject to chance events and our thoughts are governed more by fortune than by skill?²

Spinoza confidently replies, "I think I will do what is needed if I show that there must, necessarily, be a Method by which we can direct and link our clear and distinct perceptions, and that the intellect is not subject, as the body is, to accidents."³ Thus, our investigation must start by acknowledging that Spinoza thinks that there is at least one method, which, at this stage in his philosophical development, he characterizes in an apparently Cartesian manner.

Spinoza proceeds with his reply to Bouwmeester in a fashion that would come to characterize his mature work, by offering the following demonstration for his claims:

This is evident simply from this: that one clear and distinct perception, or many together, can be absolutely the cause of another clear and distinct perception. Indeed, all the clear and distinct perceptions we form can arise only from other clear and distinct perceptions in us, and cannot have any other cause outside us. From this it follows that the clear and distinct perceptions we form depend only on our nature, and its definite, fixed laws, that is, on our absolute power, not on fortune (that is, on causes which, although they too act according to definite and fixed laws, are nevertheless unknown to us and foreign to our nature and power). As for the rest of our perceptions, I confess that they depend on fortune in the highest degree.⁴

This passage is remarkable for its maintenance of Cartesian language,⁵ which is subtly

2. *Ep. XXXVII* IV/188a. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 32.

3. *Ep. XXXVII* IV/188a. *ibid.*

4. *Ep. XXXVII* *ibid.*, 32–33.

5. I.e., 'clear and distinct'.

transformed so that it hints at what would become some of Spinoza's most important mature views. The claim that "all clear and distinct perceptions... can arise only from other clear and distinct perceptions in us" could perhaps just as easily have been uttered by Descartes, were it not for the fact that Spinoza grounds it in "our nature, and its definite, fixed laws." Spinoza is thus able to argue for a deterministic conception of freedom which is compatible with his necessitarianism—a consequence Descartes would no doubt have found repugnant.

The preceding passage also echoes the well-known 2P40, in which Spinoza demonstrates that "whatever ideas follow in the Mind from ideas that are adequate in the mind are also adequate." If, in the response to Bouwmeester above, we replace 'clear and distinct' with 'adequate' and 'perceptions' with 'ideas', we arrive at one of the major epistemological doctrines of the *Ethics*.

Finally, Spinoza concludes,

From these considerations, then, it is clearly evident what the true Method must be like, and in what it chiefly consists: namely, *solely in the knowledge of the pure intellect, and of its nature and laws*. To acquire this it is necessary above all else to distinguish between the intellect and the imagination, or between true ideas and the rest, namely, the fictitious, the false, the doubtful, and absolutely all those which depend only on the memory. To understand these things, at least as far as the Method requires, it is not necessary to know the nature of the mind through its first cause, but it is sufficient to put together a little history of the mind, or of perceptions, in the way Bacon teaches.

With these few words I think I have explained and demonstrated the true Method, and at the same time, shown the Way by which we may arrive at it.⁶

So, Spinoza identifies what he calls 'true Method' with knowledge of the nature and laws of the 'pure intellect'. The fact that Spinoza thinks the knowledge of the pure intellect must be *acquired* has generated significant confusion in the literature

6. *Ep. XXXVII IV/188-189*. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 33.

about what to make of the relationship between Spinoza's epistemology, which seems to privilege immediate knowledge from innate ideas, and his methodology. To make this clearer, consider the following conceptual scheme.

This knowledge of the pure intellect is acquired by distinguishing first,

1. between the intellect and the imagination or,
2. true ideas from the rest (i.e., false, doubtful, and those which depend on memory).

This distinction suggests that the intellect is comprised solely of true ideas, whereas the imagination is the source of 'the rest'. It is perhaps surprising that Spinoza connects his conception of 'true Method' with the Baconian method, at least insofar as this latter method involves 'a history of the mind, or of perceptions.'⁷ Spinoza claims that things that depend *only* on memory can be thought of empirically, but it is unclear to what degree Spinoza considers this empirical approach to be a genuine method of understanding.⁸

We have reached our starting point. This beginning does not provide a clear understanding of what Spinoza's method actually is, but we have uncovered some hints about where to begin looking.

1.2 Early Methodological Development

Perhaps the clearest expression of Spinoza's own view is also one of his earliest:⁹

7. For one thing, Bacon's method is thoroughly empiricist, whereas Spinoza appears to be undermining this by relegating memory to the imagination rather than the intellect.

8. I return to this issue later in this chapter, during the discussion of Spinoza's method of interpretation.

9. Curley notes that though the *TdIE* was published posthumously in 1677, "a draft of it must have existed at least by early in 1662, and quite likely Spinoza wrote it before that." (Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 3)

Method is not the reasoning itself by which we understand the causes of things, much less the understanding of the causes of things; it is understanding what a true idea is by distinguishing it from the rest of the perceptions; by investigating its nature, so that from that we may come to know our power of understanding and so restrain the mind that it understands, according to that standard, everything that is to be understood; and finally by teaching and constructing certain rules as aids, so that the mind does not weary itself in useless things.¹⁰

This definition reveals the complexity of the issue. Reasoning is distinguished from understanding, and understanding the causes of things is distinguished from understanding what a true idea is. The latter is identified with ‘Method’, which requires, or consists of, the following procedures:

1. Distinguishing a true idea from the rest of the perceptions.
2. Investigating the nature of the true idea, so that we may:
 - (a) Come to know our power of understanding
and,
 - (b) Restrain the mind so that it understands, according to that standard,
everything that is to be understood.
3. Teaching and constructing certain rules as aids, so that the mind does not weary itself in useless things.

Thus, Spinoza’s conception of method involves a tripartite structure, in which distinguishing, investigating (which allows knowing and restraining), and teaching / constructing allow us to gain three things:¹¹

- M1. Knowledge of our power of understanding
- M2. Understanding (according to the standard of our power of understanding) everything that is to be understood.

10. *TdIE* 37. II/15/22-30 Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 18–19.

11. The reader may wish to commit these to memory, as I will use these principles throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

M3. Avoiding wearying the mind with useless things through the aid of rules.

What relationship do these early procedures and aims bear to geometry—to the geometrical method? The first is a straightforward epistemic aim, but it rests on a metaphysical claim about power. The knowledge in (M1) constrains the domain to which the method can be applied in (M2), but this constraint is imposed by the metaphysics, not by the epistemology. That is, the range of possible understanding extends beyond any particular thinker, whose power of understanding is limited to the physical and mental constraints of that particular mind and body. This helps make sense of (M3), which suggests that our limited power of understanding may lead to us becoming overrun by things which are, unbeknownst to us, useless, unless we have a good method.

In the second part of his *PPC*, Spinoza begins with a postulate which amounts to the exhortation that “everyone attend to his perceptions as accurately as possible, so as to be able to distinguish the clear from the obscure.”¹² This clearly corresponds to criterion (1) above.

Shortly following this, at the conclusion of a discussion of Zeno’s paradoxes in relation to Descartes’ claim that matter is infinitely extended, Spinoza again exhorts his readers to:

Note that I have opposed my reasonings to Zeno’s reasonings, and therefore that I have refuted him by reason, not by the senses, as Diogenes did. For the senses cannot provide anything else to one who is seeking the truth except the Phenomena of Nature, by which he is determined to investigate their causes. They can never show him that something is false that the intellect has clearly and distinctly found to be true. For so we judge. And therefore, *this is our Method: to demonstrate the things we put forward by reasons perceived clearly and distinctly by the intellect, and to regard as negligible whatever the senses*

12. I/181/5-10.

say that seems contrary to those reasons. As we have said, the senses can only determine the intellect to inquire into this matter rather than that one. They cannot convict it of falsity, when it has perceived something clearly and distinctly.¹³

In this passage, Spinoza emphasizes the primacy of clear and distinct perceptions, and that this implies holding that the senses are ‘negligible’. This emphasis on the primacy of clarity and distinctness constitutes an instantiation, and clarification, of the procedure for employing (M3).¹⁴ If the senses can only provide ‘the Phenomena of Nature’, and our reasons are grounded in clear and distinct perceptions, then the senses cannot contradict these reasons, because natural phenomena are, presumably, also perceptions, which are themselves either clear and distinct, or not. If they are clear and distinct, then they cannot contradict any other clear and distinct perceptions, since this would be absurd. But if they are not clear and distinct, then likewise they cannot be said to contradict any clear and distinct perception, because we must first clarify and distinguish these perceptions in order to avoid making a mistake. Therefore, not only can the senses not contradict clear and distinct perceptions, but to pursue clarifying and distinguishing perceptions that *appear* to contradict clear and distinct perceptions would amount to a useless wearying of the mind. The principle that the senses cannot contradict clear and distinct perceptions is therefore methodologically useful.

13. *PPC* IIP6, I/195/30–I/196/15. Emphasis mine.

14. The *PPC* is not straightforwardly an expression of Spinoza’s own views. However, in this case, Spinoza appears to be speaking in his own voice. If this passage were intended only to express Descartes’ view of things, then it is certainly important that at least at this stage, Spinoza is attributing a method to Descartes which is so similar to his own.

1.2.1 The Incoherence Objection

On the subject of Spinoza's early attempts to develop his method, Edwin Curley has suggested that,

the most important question, perhaps, is whether the whole concept of method, as Spinoza here presents it, is not incoherent, and so doomed to failure. On the one hand, the truth is supposed to require no sign, and having a true idea is supposed to be sufficient to remove doubt (§ 36); on the other, the method is supposed, among other things, to teach us what a true idea is, and how to distinguish it from other perceptions (§ 37)”¹⁵

Curley's charge of potential incoherence seems to rest on the fact that, according to Spinoza's definition, truth is supposed to be sufficiently discernible in itself, which implies that we should not require a method in order to know what constitutes a true idea, or how it differs from other perceptions.

Aaron Garrett has recently revived a similar issue concerning the role of definitions. For Garrett, the question is “how does one acquire these definitions given that Spinoza stated that a central component of the method was setting out the means of finding them and that the success of the method depended on good definitions?”¹⁶ Just as the problem with truth is that Spinoza seems to have asserted both that the truth needs no sign (and thus should not need a method) and that the purpose of the method is to aid us in distinguishing the true from the false, the problem with definitions is that the method seems to depend on our already having good ones, even though its purpose is supposed to be to aid us in arriving at good ones.

15. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 5. The argument is attributed to Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza (Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata)*, but in that work the argument seems to be about the incoherence of Spinoza's entire picture of reality, rather than, strictly speaking, his methodology. In what follows, I address Curley's charge of the incoherence of the method.

16. Garrett, “The Virtues of Geometry,” 20.

Garrett's solution involves treating the method as emendative therapy. On this reading "definitions are achievements, and as we achieve them, we purify and emend our minds."¹⁷ This does not itself get Spinoza out of the difficulty of reconciling the apparent contradiction between the aim and requirements of the method, but the reading of method as therapeutic does suggest that its activity is internally directed, rather than directed toward the acquisition of something outside ourselves. This points us toward a solution to the incoherence objection.

The next important move in Garrett's argument is to emphasize the metaphysical underpinnings of Spinoza's epistemology and theory of truth.

Only if we possess an idea of God can we properly judge other ideas to be true or false. This is again because all the basic metaphysical and epistemic concepts that we use to ascertain the truth derive from the idea of God and can only be made sense of through it. The unique status of the idea of God then anchors Spinoza's confidence about how and that our mental states refer. And it explains why the geometrical order of the *Ethics* must begin with the definition of God.¹⁸

The key to resolving the issue of potential incoherence is to recognize that when Spinoza speaks of a method for discerning the true from the false, he is not suggesting a method for discerning ideas which are adequate in the mind from those which are not. This is evident from the fact that he here calls both true and false ideas 'perceptions'.

The distinction between conception and perception is exceedingly important for Spinoza. When an idea is conceived, it is active, adequate, and thus known and understood. Conversely, when an idea is *perceived* it is passive, inadequate, and thus at least partially unknown and not understood. So, when Spinoza speaks of a method for discerning true perceptions from false ones, he is not referring to a method which is

17. Garrett, "The Virtues of Geometry," 38.

18. *Ibid.*, 39.

needed in order to grasp truly *conceived* ideas (i.e., ideas which are already adequate in the mind), but rather, a method which allows us to adjudicate among our perceptions, filtering out those which are false from those which are, as much as a perception can be, true.

Take, for example, the perception that there is currently someone in the room. If there is currently a person in the room, then, of course, my perception is true, otherwise, in the relevant sense, obviously it is not.¹⁹ Strictly speaking, my perception of a person in the room, when there truly is a person in the room, still involves inadequate ideas, precisely because my perception is a matter of interactions between an external thing (the other person) and my body. The method for distinguishing the true from the false that Spinoza is concerned with is therefore not strictly about ideas *per se*, because ideas in themselves are adequate, and therefore always true.

In our example of a perception of someone in the room, Spinoza's method would be concerned with distinguishing those perceptions which lead me to believe that there is someone in the room when there is not—such as, e.g., a noise, or a memory of the person who was just here but who left without my noticing—from those perceptions which lead me to believe that there is someone in the room when there is—such as non-hallucinatory interactions. As we saw above, Spinoza is explicitly concerned with the primacy of the intellect's clarity and distinctness over sensory information which seems to contradict it. Spinoza is not insisting, contrary to his view of truth, that the intellect needs a method to know when some clear and distinct idea is true, but rather that we require a method in order to guide the intellect in its inquiry into our

19. This claim disregards Gettier cases, in which the perception may be erroneous, but because there is still a person in the room, the belief derived from the erroneous perception still seems to count as knowledge. Spinoza's account of knowledge requires causal connection, and so in such cases while erroneous perception provides knowledge of *something*, it will not justify a belief that is causally disconnected from it.

sensory perceptions, some of which are true, and some of which are false, but all of which are confused.

Garrett suggests that in this method we find Spinoza's "metaphysical analysis or, quite literally, conceptual analysis. We separate out our false ideas and false and fictitious ideas from our true ideas as we deduce. And, gradually, we adequately conceive and hone in on the proper extension and intention of our innate ideas, now less obscured and confused by fictions."²⁰

Garrett's claims here, however, only apply to deduction, i.e., to rational procedures that are applied in thought. These procedures cannot directly affect the perceptions themselves, because these perceptions always involve external causes. What happens, then, cannot be a literal separation of true from false ideas. We cannot truly rid ourselves of confused and obscure perceptions, because these are caused simply by our having perceptual organs. This form of emendation, then, must consist in either the generation of new ideas (which are adequate and true), or the demonstrative procedure of reordering existing ideas so that we can have both the confused perceptions of sensation while another part of ourselves maintains the correct conception of things. This is perhaps most apparent in demonstrations of optical (and other sensory) illusions.

For example, no matter how many times we are shown the Müller-Lyer illusion,²¹ we cannot through sheer force of reason re-order our perceptions so that we see the truth. The lines always appear to be different lengths. Yet, we also know the truth, and are not confused about it. We are, nevertheless, in Spinoza's terms, irreparably confused in our perceptions. What's more, the adequacy that we achieve must have already been in us, since we do not acquire it by means of an externally caused re-ordering of

20. Garrett, "The Virtues of Geometry," 43.

21. This is the well-known illusion of two parallel lines of the same length, with arrows facing in opposite directions so that one appears longer than the other.

perception. As Garrett suggests, the method guides us to true definitions. Perhaps in the resolution of the illusion, we gain proper definitions of the lines themselves, and of how visual perception of length is affected by the geometric properties of objects.

In order for an explanation of the illusion to convince us that our perception is mistaken, we must have an adequate grasp of the conditions under which explanations are themselves justified. This requires an understanding of truth and falsehood that is in some way innate, otherwise we could never move beyond sheer confused perceptions.

Thus, Spinoza's early methodology can avoid the charge of incoherence, if we consider that in part the method involves what may be merely perfunctory analysis of concepts (which, in some sense, we already have). This analysis is motivated by perception, which always involves confusion of concepts—an internal bodily state which may be adequate or inadequate, and an external body which is the partial cause of the internal bodily state, and thus always imparts something of itself only partially. Only when we have arrived at clarified concepts, or definitions of things, can the method proceed to synthetic deduction, on the basis of these definitions.

1.3 The Mature Method

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza's focus is ostensibly on four major topics: metaphysics, epistemology (and a little physics), psychology, and ultimately, ethics. Nevertheless, the methodological views developed in the *TdIE* appear to be playing a role in Spinoza's later approach. There are only a few scant references to 'method' in the text, but they are all illuminating. In the first case, Spinoza explains that

...some axioms, or notions, result from *other causes which it would be helpful to explain by this method of ours*. For from these [explanations] it would be established which notions are more useful than the others, and which are of

hardly any use; and then, which are common, which are clear and distinct only to those who have no prejudices, and finally, which are ill-founded.²²

The axioms to which Spinoza is referring here are those that have been called ‘Transcendental’, and also ‘Universal’. These, he says, require causal explanations through the same method as other axioms, so that we might discern their utility, if they have any. Spinoza claims that Transcendental “terms arise from the fact that the human Body, being limited, is capable of forming distinctly only a certain number of images at the same time.”²³ Universals “have arisen from similar causes, viz. because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human Body that they surpass the power of imagining”, and more generally, “these terms signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree.”²⁴ Under Spinoza’s tripartite methodological structure, following the divisions outlined above, his account of Transcendentals and Universals can be made much clearer.

The power of our understanding ((M1) above) is explicated in terms of the actual nature of the true ideas of Transcendentals and Universals—our limited capacity to imagine (i.e., perceive) many ideas at once results in psychological simplification which quite literally confuses those ideas we do actually imagine to produce a single idea, as if it represents an entire set of entities. So, we now know the power of our understanding to handle many perceptions at once. Why should we bother to know about this at all? Spinoza hints that he sees this topic falling under (M2) by prefacing his discussion with the phrase ‘but not to omit anything it is necessary to know.’ Why does he think it is necessary to know the true nature and origin of Transcendentals and Universals? The answer comes at the end of the scholium, where he asserts that “it is not surprising

22. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 2p40s1 Emphasis mine.

23. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 2p40s1.

24. Ibid.

that so many controversies have arisen among the philosophers, who have wished to explain natural things by mere images of things.”²⁵ Spinoza’s aim, then, is to use his method to: demonstrate the power of understanding of Transcendentals and Universals that we actually have; be able to distinguish the true ideas of Transcendentals and Universals from the other perceptions we may have of them (e.g., perceptions of universals as actually existing things); and finally, this approach provides an account of the usefulness of these ideas, which allows us to avoid spending time and effort discussing those aspects which, according to this analysis turn out, by virtue of being confused, not to be very useful at all. Thus, this case falls squarely under each of the three parts of Spinoza’s conception of method.

Spinoza only mentions ‘method’ (*methodus*) once more in the *Ethics*. This second instance occurs in a well-known passage at the end of the Preface to *Ethics III*, which I quote here at length.²⁶

- (P1) It is true that there have been some very distinguished men (to whose work and diligence we confess that we owe much), who have written many admirable things about the right way of living, and given men advice full of prudence. But no one, to my knowledge, has determined the nature and powers of the Affects, nor what, on the other hand, the Mind can do to moderate them. I know, of course, that the celebrated Descartes, although he too believed that the Mind has absolute power over its own actions, nevertheless sought to explain human Affects through their first causes, and at the same time to show the way by which the Mind can have absolute dominion over its Affects. But in my opinion, he showed nothing but the cleverness of his understanding, as I shall show in the proper place.
- (P2) For now I wish to return to those who prefer to curse or laugh at the Affects and actions of men, rather than understand them. To them it will doubtless seem strange that I should undertake to treat men’s vices and absurdities in the

25. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 2p40s1.

26. I have added the labels P1-4 in order to more easily refer back to important features of each paragraph.

Geometric style, and that I should wish to demonstrate by certain reasoning things which are contrary to reason, and which they proclaim to be empty, absurd, and horrible.

- (P3) But my reason is this: nothing happens in nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, i.e., the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, viz. through the universal laws and rules of nature.
- (P4) The Affects, therefore, of hate, anger, envy, etc., considered in themselves, follow from the same necessity and force of nature as the other singular things. And therefore they acknowledge certain causes, through which they are understood, and have certain properties, as worthy of our knowledge as the properties of any other thing, by the mere contemplation of which we are pleased. Therefore, I shall treat the nature and powers of the Affects, and the power of the Mind over them, by the same Method by which, in the preceding parts, I treated God and the Mind, and I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a Question of lines, planes, and bodies.²⁷

The first thing Spinoza does in this passage is to provide a target for his attack. It is rare for Spinoza to mention other philosophers (indeed, in this passage he also directly mentions Descartes), so this suggests that he thinks they (including Descartes) are particularly mistaken here. Furthermore, his approach offers an important (i.e., correct) alternative. The topic is, he says, ‘the right way of living’. The connection between a right way of living and method is, and will continue to be, a recurring theme in this dissertation. In this quintessential series of passages, the right way of living is raised, and a unified, naturalistic, method is proposed as a procedure for investigating the sources of things which aid or hinder our pursuit of this way of living, regardless of the unorthodoxy of this approach.

27. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume I, II/137-138.

Other philosophers may have offered ‘admirable’ accounts of how to obtain the right way of living, but they were all missing something of great importance: they had not ‘determined the nature and powers of the Affects’. Thus, in (P1), Spinoza is again applying his method to show that when it comes to the Affects, because we had an inadequate knowledge of the nature and power of them, we therefore had an inadequate knowledge of our understanding of them (M1). In addition, the Affects, by virtue of their important place in human life, are certainly to be understood (M2). Finally, we need new rules by which to understand them, in order to avoid mistakes and useless ideas (M3). It also significant to note that Spinoza appears to explicitly connect the geometric *style* with his method.²⁸

What sort of useless ideas and mistakes might we have about the Affects? Spinoza suggests in (P2) that ‘those who prefer to curse or laugh at the Affects and actions of men’ have not understood the Affects at all. Why not? Spinoza’s method tells us that ‘the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, viz. through the universal laws and rules of nature’ (P3). So, ‘the Affects, therefore, of hate, anger, envy, etc., considered in themselves, follow from the same necessity and force of nature as the other singular things’ (P4). There is much of significance for understanding Spinoza’s overall philosophical tenor in these claims. In

28. Jonathan Bennett argues that in this passage Spinoza “seems to refer to that ‘geometrical’ demonstrative procedure which is my present topic; but the sequel shows that Spinoza chiefly has in mind his view that men’s affects can be causally explained through the laws of nature, and are therefore fit subjects for scientific study.” (Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 19–20) Bennett is right to note that Spinoza is chiefly concerned with natural-causal explanation, but Bennett goes on to make the much stronger claim that “his point, which would have been better served by a comparison with physics, has nothing to do with handling the affects through an apparatus of axioms and logical derivations. Spinoza may not have been clear about this in his own mind.” (ibid.) Bennett’s objection that the geometrical apparatus ‘has nothing to do with’ Spinoza’s point is not justified by the arguments provided. Whether or not Spinoza’s point would have been better served by comparing the study of the Affects to physics is a topic for another place. It is worth admitting that Bennett’s denigration of the geometric style is paradigmatic of the interpretation of Spinoza’s method in which the style is simply irrelevant.

(P3) we see Spinoza assert a strong version of methodological (or, indeed, epistemic) monism. (P4) follows straightforwardly since the Affects will be a subset of the set of all things.

Spinoza also takes care to remind us that he is speaking of the Affects *per se*, precisely because his method requires us to distinguish the true ideas of the Affects (i.e., the actual Affects) from other perceptions (such as our confused ideas about what we are feeling when we are affected by Affects). These latter perceptions are the source of the curses and laughter at the Affects of men—in particular, we will be prone to this behaviour if we think that others are able to freely restrain their responses to the Affects, or to avoid them, or to choose their actions, with a free will. Spinoza’s innovation is, in my view, to apply wholeheartedly the same methodological principles, which we already accept for the rest of nature, to ourselves. When we do this, we see that things are as they must be. We may appropriately call this a form of methodological monism. Thus, Spinoza’s necessitarianism is clearly tied to his method.

Marx Wartofsky has claimed similarly that,

not only the bodily affections but those of the mind as well are to be included in the science of mechanism. The continuity of sensory perception, emotion, and thought is to be reaffirmed. But such a reaffirmation cannot be achieved simply by methodological fiat; rather, the metaphysics of Descartes has to be fundamentally revised, and the ontological dualism overcome, so that a methodological monism can be asserted. If no domain is to be immune to the mathematical method, and to explanation in terms of efficient causes which this method offers, then mind, no less than body, must be adequately conceived as determined to its activity by causes.²⁹

Wartofsky’s remarks emphasize that Spinoza is at pains to overcome the success of the Cartesian model of nature in which bodies subject to mechanism, are cleaved

29. Wartofsky, “Action and Passion: Spinoza’s Construction of a Scientific Psychology,” 234.

from (human) minds, which are not. That Spinoza cannot achieve his aim simply by asserting a methodological preference is an important cautionary note. There is a troubling question that arises here about the order of operations in Spinoza's philosophical approach.

Wartofsky argues that Spinoza cannot simply help himself to his methodology and construct his ontology out of that, but rather the methodology must be, in some way, beholden to the objects of its enquiry. It remains to be seen whether this is an accurate reading of the priority of Spinoza's philosophizing. In what follows, we shall keep this thought in mind, and consider whether it constitutes a cogent critique of Spinoza, or perhaps discover that Spinoza can avoid this charge, or otherwise defend his methodological approach.³⁰

This understanding of Spinoza's methodology may help clarify much of his approach in his other works, where the subject matter seems quite far removed from natural philosophy, and mathematical method seems more suitable.

1.4 Spinoza's Theologico-Political Method

In the *TTP*, Spinoza develops one of the first modern attempts at biblical criticism,³¹ which rests on his commitment to *sola scriptura* and understanding of history.

Some commentators have suggested that Spinoza drops his methodological monism here, because the historical requirement for understanding scriptural/textual ideas is not strictly required, it seems, for any other part of nature.³² This leads to the worry that Spinoza is methodologically inconsistent, because he claims on the one hand that

30. I return briefly to Wartofsky's challenge in Chapter 6.

31. Despite his unquestionable audacity, as Curley notes, it is implausible to suggest that Spinoza is the sole originator of a new science of biblical hermeneutics. (Curley, "Spinoza on truth," 77)

32. E.g., Hubbeling, *Spinoza's Methodology*.

everything must be explained according to the singular order of Nature, and yet he introduces what appears to be an extra demand for explanations of human history and meaning.

One way in which Spinoza's methodology may be able to withstand such objections is to preserve its monism by affirming the historicity of *all* understanding, at least for actually existing (or having existed) particular things. Actually existing things exist in time. This temporal indexing necessarily involves a particular causal history for each entity. Since to understand any particular thing is to understand its causes (by 1A4), and the causes of actually existing things are events in time, it follows that understanding actually existing particular things requires, in some sense, understanding their histories.³³

In the case of historical texts, we seem to be in a different position with respect to understanding the ideas contained therein than we are when considering particular physical events. But such differences may seem less stark if we consider how we understand events in epidemiology, or biology, or even chemistry. These sciences do require following causal interactions across time in a way that, while ultimately aiming at the production of general laws, still requires tracking what may count as 'histories'. Alternatively, there may be a way to reduce talk of history in the case of scripture to

33. Matthew Taylor has pointed out that this raises the threat of a potential infinite regress, if we cannot specify how far back one must trace causes in order to understand something. This is a difficult issue for Spinoza. The issue of regress affects many forms of scientific inquiry, for which we must adopt practical limitations. One implication of this view is that the causal requirement renders all knowledge of this kind necessarily partial. There is another story to tell about the third kind of knowledge (or '*scientia intuitiva*'), which does seem to involve a grasp of infinite causal chains at once. I suspect that Spinoza cannot have meant this grasping to occur in a temporal order, because that would make human beings Zeno Machines—entities capable of computing an infinite number of steps in a finite amount of time—which is absurd. One possible solution is to hold that insofar as it is in the nature of reason to regard things as eternal, intuitive knowledge involves a grasp of the eternal aspect of modes, which are actually existing infinite causal chains, but are *sub specie aeternitatis* single powers of God. I grant that more needs to be said about this, but I leave it for another place.

talk of causes, in which case the apparent disunity of the method may also fall away. Before addressing this, let us first see how Spinoza actually sets up this historically oriented methodological approach, by turning to the *TTP*.

Spinoza's commitment to the common order of nature, and the necessity of nature, requires applying the same rules for understanding human beings as anything else – he is explicit about this: “the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ at all from the method of interpreting nature, but agrees with it completely.”³⁴ However, Curley (following Akkerman, Lagrée, and Moreau) has claimed that “though Spinoza insists that the method for interpreting Scripture does not differ at all from the method for interpreting nature, in fact the history of Scripture required for understanding Scripture has a strictly historical dimension which is lacking in the history of nature required for understanding nature.”³⁵ This distinction between kinds of history is not obvious, and, as Curley's remark suggests, to object in this way requires saying, effectively, that one kind of history lacks a historical dimension. What does it mean for a history to lack a historical dimension? What is this purported dimension which is lacking in the case of the history of nature? Such apparent differences may still ultimately mask a single underlying methodology. The question is whether Spinoza's explicit endorsement of a unified methodology is supported by the rest of what he says in the *TTP*.

Spinoza goes on to explain that

the method of interpreting nature consists above all in putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things. In the same way, to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture and to infer from it the mind of Scripture's

34. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume II, III/98/15-20.

35. *Ibid.*, 634–635.

authors, by legitimate inferences, as from certain data and principles.³⁶

This is clear evidence that Spinoza intends his methods to be unified, at least in terms of the way they operate. Here, a ‘history of nature’ seems to suggest what should be familiar to any modern physicist attempting to confirm the existence of a hypothesized particle (e.g., the recently confirmed Higgs boson): make and record observations over time, collate the data, and then make inferences from this data to definitions which can be used to (further) understand nature. Spinoza seems to take a ‘history of Scripture’ to similarly consist of observations about the text itself, which likewise can be treated as a data-set. What is perhaps striking about the analogy is that Spinoza treats the ‘mind of Scripture’s authors’ as in some way identical to ‘the definitions of natural things’. For Spinoza, as for Hobbes and Bacon, true definitions capture the essence of things. These essences are *causes* of the activity of the things. So, Spinoza’s method seems to amount to a method of inferring the causes of things from their effects, i.e., at least in the case of natural and scriptural knowledge, from the data they have generated.

Spinoza concludes,

For in this way everyone—provided he has admitted no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing it than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history—everyone will always proceed without danger of error.³⁷

Spinoza’s confidence that this method *always* removes the risk of error stems from both the causal necessity of the nature of the things being investigated and the procedural limits placed on the investigation by the method. If we are restricted only to principles and data which can be drawn from the domain of investigation, it seems

36. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, III/98/20-30.

37. *Ibid.*

that by following this method, we are able to avoid confusion or contamination, or any other source of error. There is, however, the question of whether such a methodological restriction is even possible. The principle of *sola scriptura* or, sociologists of science might say, of 'pure data', requires accounting for the implements of investigation—the scientific instruments and the fuzziness of our own minds—which we necessarily bring to bear on matters of perceptual understanding.

Readers—mine or Spinoza's—might now be brought to a sceptical pause by the obvious difference between the two domains to which Spinoza has assigned his method. Much of the concern about the unity of Spinoza's methodology seems to be carried by the obvious differences that are discernible between natural-scientific domains and Scripture (or any other texts). Spinoza is not only aware of the distinction, but rests the importance of his method on it. In fact, he argues that his method of interpreting Scripture "is not only certain, but also the only way, and that it agrees with the method of interpreting nature", but, in order to establish this, "we must note that Scripture most often treats things which cannot be deduced from principles known to the natural light."³⁸ There is a conundrum here. Does Spinoza wish to *reduce* or *identify* or *unify* the method of interpreting scripture and the method of interpreting nature? There is an ambiguity in the meaning of 'agrees' which may suggest that there is still a sense in which these two methods, while agreeing entirely with one another are nevertheless distinct.

1.4.1 'Known to the Natural Light'

We have noted above that the *domains* of investigation in question, i.e., Nature and Scripture, are distinct, while the method used to investigate either may nevertheless

38. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, III/98/30.

be one and the same. But now, Spinoza claims that Scripture speaks of things which ‘cannot be deduced from principles known to the natural light’. Because the things that Scripture speaks of cannot be deduced from the natural light, he also claims that “our whole knowledge of [Scripture] and of spiritual matters must be sought from Scripture alone, and not from those things we know by the natural light.”³⁹ So, if the investigation of this domain cannot involve principles known to the natural light, then it seems reasonable to ask in what sense the method for its investigation *agrees* with the method of investigation of Nature at all.

There is only one other place where Spinoza uses the phrase ‘principles known to the natural light’, and that is in his earlier distinction between Prophecy and miracles. Regarding these, he explains,

I’ve proceeded regarding miracles according to a method completely different from the one I followed regarding Prophecy. Concerning Prophecy I affirmed nothing but what I could infer from foundations revealed in the Sacred Texts. But here I’ve elicited the main points only from principles known to the natural light. I did this deliberately. For since Prophecy surpasses man’s power of understanding, and is a purely Theological question, I could affirm nothing about it, nor even know in what it chiefly consisted, except from the foundations which have been revealed. [...] But concerning miracles what we are asking is completely philosophical: can we grant that something happens in nature contrary to its laws, or something which couldn’t follow from them? So I didn’t need anything like that. Indeed, I thought it wiser to unravel this question according to foundations known to the natural light, as those which are most known. I say that I thought it wiser, for I could easily have resolved it solely from the doctrines and foundations of Scripture.⁴⁰

In this passage, the distinction between the investigation into miracles and the investigation into Prophecy seems to track the distinction between the method of investigation of Nature and the method of investigating Scripture. In fact, Spinoza

39. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, III/10/20-23.

40. *Ibid.*, III/94/65–III/95/15.

claims that these methods are *completely* different. The reason for this seems to rest in Spinoza's suggestion that because Prophecy 'surpasses man's power of understanding', we are stuck drawing inferences from what is said about it textually. Miracles, on the other hand, involve a philosophical question about nature, and so may be investigated according to principles of nature.

Spinoza admits that it would also be possible to investigate the same phenomenon with the other method (i.e., of investigating Scripture). It is also telling that he suggests that it is wiser to investigate this question with the principles of the natural light. A textual investigation will uncover only what the authors of the text mean to say *about* miracles, rather than settle the natural facts of the matter about miracles, not that there is, strictly speaking, any difference in the methodology itself. Principles 'known to the natural light' may differ from principles that we can only learn from a text, but this does not require that the method of employing these principles to come to knowledge of the domain should differ. In both cases, the method concerns the manner in which principles are discerned and applied to data to generate definitions.

To use Spinoza's example, suppose we seek to understand miracles. If we search Scripture for accounts of miracles (as Spinoza does), we will arrive not at an account of any specific natural phenomena (nor, indeed, will we possess any perceptions of miracles ourselves), but rather an account of the ways in which a number of people, i.e., the authors of Scripture, spoke about a variety of things, which they have called 'miracles'. It remains to be seen whether these ways of speaking constitute a coherent account, or an account of a singular (kind of) phenomenon. Conversely, if we take as our data-source the natural world itself, and the principles of the natural world which we already know, we can see rather clearly that if miracles are taken to contradict the

laws of nature, then they cannot exist. This is why Spinoza concludes,

it follows with utmost clarity that miracles were natural events, and hence, that they are to be explained in such a way that they do not seem to be something new (to use Solomon's term) or to be contrary to nature. If possible, they should be explained in such a way that they seem to be very much in agreement with natural things.⁴¹

There is, plainly, a difference between an investigation into the nature of purportedly miraculous phenomena, and an investigation into what Scripture says *about* miracles. An investigation into the latter can only tell us what the authors of Scripture understood, but it does not determine the matter of whether what Scripture says is an accurate depiction of Nature. However, as Spinoza makes clear, if Scripture seems to suggest that the events called 'miracles' were natural events (i.e., events that actually happen in the world), then understanding them requires not a history of Scripture, but a history of Nature. So, it still appears that the methods are quite different.

We still have not entirely determined the sense in which these methods (and their histories) *agree*. In one of the many passages where Spinoza asserts that the method of interpretation of Scripture proceeds 'in the same way' as the method of interpreting Nature, he provides yet another gloss of the content of that 'way', suggesting that "in examining natural things we strive to investigate first the things most universal and common to the whole of nature: motion and rest, and their laws and rules, which nature always observes and through which it continuously acts. From these we proceed gradually to other, less universal things."⁴² In this passage, Spinoza endorses the epistemic priority of wholes to their parts, i.e., the knowledge of less universal things requires first knowing the most universal properties (of all things), which Spinoza

41. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, III/94/65–III/95/15.

42. *Ibid.*, III/102/20-25.

seems to identify with basic laws of physics. How, then, could the method of the investigation of scripture *agree* with this? Spinoza is clear that one way the methods agree is in terms of epistemic priority, arguing “in the same way, the first thing we must seek from the history of Scripture is what is most universal, what is the basis and foundation of the whole of Scripture, and finally, what all the Prophets commend in it as an eternal teaching, *most useful* for all mortals.”⁴³

So, the two methods, while disagreeing about the means by which certain things can be known, *viz.* the natural light, agree on an order of investigation (or, to use a phrase Spinoza employs elsewhere, a ‘proper order of philosophizing’), which the various means by which things can be known can share.

At the start of this discussion, we saw that Spinoza had ‘proceeded regarding miracles according to a method *completely different* from the one [he] followed regarding Prophecy’. The distinction between investigation into miracles and Prophecy is now much clearer. Above, I said that this distinction *seems* to track the Nature/Scripture distinction, which lends credence to the objection that Spinoza’s conception of method is incoherent. Now it can be shown that this is not quite right. It is not that the methods themselves totally disagree, but rather that they differ in the means by which things can be known, but do not differ in the epistemic priority, or the order by which things can (indeed, must) be known. In the specific case of miracles, the distinction ultimately serves to undercut the authority of Scripture.

By making miracles a philosophical question, rather than a theological one, scriptural accounts cannot thereby be used as direct evidence of the nature of miraculous events. This does not imply that investigations which proceed according to the method of interpreting Scripture thereby *would* license miraculous events, and that that is

43. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, III/102/25-30.

why these are different methods. It is, rather, the opposite.

The method of interpreting Scripture does not differ from the method of interpreting Nature in terms of epistemic priority or access, but only in terms of the means by which something can be known. This simply depends on what we are trying to understand. If we are trying to understand the properties of some event as it occurred in nature, then we know that testimony is only as good as the testimonial source is independently trustworthy. But if we are trying to understand what the authors of scripture meant, then we must look to the history of scripture. In either case, we operate ultimately according to the priority of the universal or common before the particular. Spinoza's method for the interpretation of Scripture is focused on "those statements of Scripture which concern the way we should conduct our lives, and which therefore can be investigated more easily."⁴⁴ But he also affirms this of investigations into the "intention of the Prophets", which is more difficult, because "the Prophets disagreed among themselves in speculative matters, and their narrations of things were very much accommodated to the prejudices of each age."⁴⁵ Here, Spinoza argues

Concerning these matters too, we must begin with the things which are most universal, inquiring first from the clearest statements of Scripture, to find out what Prophecy *or* revelation is, and in what it chiefly consists. Next we must ask what a miracle is, and so on, with the things which are most common. From there we must descend to the opinions of each Prophet. And from these things finally we must proceed to the meaning of each revelation *or* Prophecy, of each story, and of each miracle.⁴⁶

We already saw that Spinoza does not think that miracles are supernatural, and that they should be investigated according to the method of interpreting nature. In the preceding passage, we see Spinoza embedding the investigation of miracles into

44. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, III/104/15-20.

45. *Ibid.*, III/104/20-24.

46. *Ibid.*, III/104/29-35.

the investigation of scripture, which suggests that, though there will be a difference between miracles and Prophecy, it is not really a difference between a natural method and some other kind. Nor is it a difference in epistemic priority. There is a difference only in terms of whether we can investigate one or the other according to common rules. Scripture can be investigated according to rules of the language in which it was written, and rules concerning the history of the text and the people who wrote it. Yet, all of these rules can be subsumed under the more universal laws of nature, allowing a single overarching method, while allowing differences in the rules required for the investigation of different domains.

1.5 Conclusion

Recall paragraph (P3) above, in which Spinoza held that “the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, viz. through the universal laws and rules of nature.” I have argued in this chapter that this passage commits Spinoza to methodological monism. We then considered the objection that Spinoza’s own methodological views contradict monism. These objections rest on a conflation of a distinction between methods and a distinction between domains. We considered a further objection, raised by Wartofsky, that Spinoza illegitimately reads his ontology off of his methodology. This objection is vitiated if we recognize that the methodology itself is beholden to the ontology of the particular intellect in which it happens to be employed. That is, the usefulness of a method depends necessarily on what can be utilised by a particular kind of being. Spinoza’s method specifically targets our power of understanding, and its limits, and in doing so, presupposes them.

The method of interpreting nature is the most universal or general method, because

nature as a whole is the most universal or general domain. The method of the interpretation of Scripture is a particular, specific, instantiation of the more universal method, applying rules that agree with (indeed are a part of) the more general rules of Nature itself, but which nevertheless are specific to texts, or to Scripture, and its particular history. As Spinoza puts it, “this method of ours, founded on the principle that the knowledge of Scripture is to be sought only from Scripture, is the only true method [of interpreting Scripture].”⁴⁷

Yet, despite this endorsement of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, Spinoza concludes that “This method requires no light beyond the natural light itself. For the nature and excellence of this light consists above all in this: that by legitimate principles of inference it deduces and infers things obscure from things known, or given as known. Our method requires nothing else.”⁴⁸ We may conclude, therefore, that Spinoza’s mature understanding of method retains its monistic and naturalistic character. The natural light serves as a metaphor for the unity of the most general laws of Nature itself, which are in every part of Nature equally. The requirements of investigations into specific parts of nature will depend in part on the particular features of the given domain, but also on the knowledge and capacities of the investigator(s).

In proceeding from what is known or given as known, the method rests on the nature of our individual intellects. Each individual human being will, to a greater or lesser degree, possess more or less clear and distinct (or adequate) ideas of things, and to that extent will operate with a greater or lesser capacity for employing Spinoza’s method.

This chapter has shown that Spinoza’s conception of method does not change

47. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, III/106/9-11.

48. *Ibid.*, III/112/2-8.

much from the early stages of his philosophical development to his mature works. The principles of this method consist in distinguishing true from false perceptions, in prioritizing the whole over the parts as far as the rules governing understanding are concerned, and in avoiding wearying the mind with useless things. The particular issues of the implementation of this method, especially as concerns the *Ethics* will be considered in greater detail in later chapters.

In the next chapter we will consider Spinoza's method in the light of its historical antecedents, which should give us a complete overview from which to analyze the particular idiosyncracies of the method as it unfolds, or (where there are flaws) unravels.

Chapter 2

Philosophical Method from Zabarella to Spinoza

*Verum via nostra et ratio (ut saepe perspicue diximus et adhuc dicere juvat) ea est; ut non opera ex operibus sive experimenta ex experimentis (ut empirici), sed ex operibus et experimentis causas et axiomata, atque ex causis et axiomatibus rursus nova opera et experimenta (ut legitimi Naturae Interpretes), extrahamus.*¹

—Francis Bacon

2.1 Introduction

Spinoza explicitly mentions both Bacon and Descartes in key passages relating to his own understanding of method. Given the general paucity of reference to other philosophers in Spinoza's writing, it is worth taking seriously the degree to which Baconian and Cartesian methods may be incorporated into Spinoza's thinking. In addition, Aaron Garrett has rightly suggested that "Hobbes was one of the greatest influences on the way in which Spinoza thought about method."² Furthermore, Garrett

1. Bacon, *Novum Organum*, §117. My translation: "Our course and method (as we have often said, and say again) is not (like the empiricists) to deduce effects from effects, nor experiments from experiments, but (as legitimate Interpreters of Nature), to deduce causes and axioms from effects and experiments; and new effects and experiments from those causes and axioms." The resemblance of this to aspects of Spinoza's method already discussed should be readily apparent.

2. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 103.

considers the influence of Renaissance Aristotelian, Jacopo (or Giacomo) Zabarella on Hobbes and Descartes, and so on Spinoza, in some detail. Recently, there has also been some attention paid to the relationship between Bacon and Spinoza.³

The aim of this chapter is not to retrace these steps, but rather to reconsider certain features of these key methodological antecedents in the light of the understanding of Spinoza's method developed in Chapter 1. By consequence, a clear understanding of the methodological insights of Zabarella, Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes will allow us to see how Spinoza importantly diverges from them. This account will ground the sustained examination of Spinoza's actual philosophical method(s), which follows in the subsequent chapters.

2.2 Conceptualizing Method

The current way of conceptualizing Spinoza's use of the geometrical method in the English-language scholarship goes back at least as far as Harry Austryn Wolfson's *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, but there is also a clear discussion of the geometrical method in Harold H. Joachim's *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza (Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata)*. Joachim asserts, "The title of Spinoza's work is *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, and the method of demonstration is not, for Spinoza, merely an external form into which the matter is forced."⁴ Conversely, Wolfson argues for the following four substantial propositions:

- (1) Both Descartes and Lodewijk Meyer make a distinction between the geometrical method of demonstration, which may be either synthetic or analytic,

3. See, e.g., Selcer, "From *scientia operativa* to *scientia intuitiva*: Producing particulars in Bacon and Spinoza"; Jalobeanu, "Francis Bacon, Early Modern Baconians, And The Idols Of Baconian Scholarship."

4. Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza (Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata)*, 9.

and the geometrical form of literary exposition, which, whether synthetic or analytic, is to be modelled after the literary form of Euclid's *Elements*.

(2) The geometrical method of demonstration of the synthetic type is nothing but valid syllogistic reasoning as practised throughout the history of philosophy.

(3) The geometrical method of demonstration, whether synthetic or analytic, need not necessarily be written in the geometrical literary form, and, conversely, the use of the geometrical literary form is not determined by the subject-matter of which it treats.

(4) Spinoza's mathematical way of looking at things means only the denial of design in nature and freedom in man, and this need not necessarily be written in the geometrical literary form.⁵

One thing that becomes clear in Wolfson's extensive discussion, and in the literature that has followed it, is that different senses of method and order, and indeed, geometry, are easily conflated or otherwise confused. This might be a good candidate explanation for continued dispute about the geometrical method among scholars. The four propositions above offer an extremely helpful, though not necessarily uncontroversial, starting schema for thinking about the historical status of method leading up to and following Spinoza. These propositions can be summarized in the following table:

	Demonstration	Exposition
Analytic	— ⁶	Euclidean: Yes or No
Synthetic	Valid syllogistic reasoning	Euclidean: Yes or No

This table summarizes a number of interesting features of Wolfson's interpretation. First, Wolfson's remarks do not make it quite clear whether he takes Spinoza's use of the geometrical method of demonstration, whether in the Euclidean form or not, to be analytic, synthetic, or both. It is probable that Wolfson takes Spinoza to be

5. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, 45. I have divided the passage into numbered paragraphs for both argumentative and reading ease.

6. On this, see, e.g., Descartes.

employing the synthetic method, since this has been the generally accepted reading of Spinoza. As Ursula Goldenbaum writes: “only Spinoza, notoriously, explicitly uses the synthetic method in his major work *Ethics*.”⁷ However, Wolfson’s identification of the synthetic geometrical method of demonstration with ‘valid syllogistic reasoning’ suggests that he takes demonstrative philosophy in general to be geometrical. Against Goldenbaum’s claim, this would instead make Spinoza’s method unremarkable. Thus, we may conclude that Wolfson’s remark that “if we could cut up all the philosophic literature available to him into slips of paper, toss them up into the air, and let them fall back to the ground, then out of these scattered slips of paper we could reconstruct his *Ethics*”⁸ may be applied equally to Spinoza’s method.

More peculiarly, Wolfson’s claim about the method would make Joachim’s remark about the method of demonstration not being an external form a confused, or potentially trivial, one—is Joachim’s claim about the method of demonstration, or rather what Wolfson would call the ‘method of exposition’? If Joachim really does mean to refer to the method of demonstration, then, if Wolfson is correct, it is trivial to say this about Spinoza’s philosophy, since syllogistic form just *is* synthetic philosophical demonstration. So, perhaps Joachim really means to refer to the method of exposition, or geometrical order, in which case, Joachim and Wolfson may disagree, if Joachim’s claim is taken to mean that Spinoza’s philosophy *requires* the form in which it is presented. Part of the task of this chapter is to attempt to untie at least some of the knots that scholars have inadvertently tied while trying to disentangle these interconnected strands in Spinoza’s thought.

Joachim’s view can be summarized using the same table as before:

7. Goldenbaum, “Geometrical Method — Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.”

8. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, 3.

	Demonstration	Exposition
Analytic	—	Euclidean: Yes or No
Synthetic	A) Suitable	Euclidean: Yes
	B) Required	

The differences are subtle, but important. By referring to the *ordine* in the title of the *Ethics*, Joachim suggests that Spinoza’s philosophical method is *at least* suited to the order in which it is presented.

This brings us to the second point. Wolfson’s view of Spinoza has come under considerable sustained scrutiny over the past near-century, and in a number of disputes, his views have been soundly rejected.⁹ However, on the matter of Spinoza’s method, his view constitutes an antipode on one side of an ongoing dispute. This dispute concerns the philosophical function of the geometrical method and order in Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

2.2.1 Logical and Didactic Interpretations

In Garrett’s *Meaning in Spinoza’s Method*, an entire chapter is devoted to the distinction between analysis and synthesis. Garrett presents the standard dichotomy for the interpretation of Spinoza’s geometrical method in the following way. First, the didactic interpretation of Spinoza’s method:

Some interpreters of Spinoza consider the *mos geometricus* to be primarily a teaching method used to dress up ideas acquired in some way independent of their geometrical presentation.¹⁰

9. See, e.g., Bennett’s remark that “Refuting Wolfson is now standard practice among commentators.” (Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 146)

10. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza’s Method*, 99.

From this we might gather that, whatever differences there are in the interpretations of Joachim and Wolfson, they both fall under the didactic interpretation of the method. The method is, on this reading, an instrument for teaching truths which may have been (and may be) discovered some other way, but may also be amendable to this particular mode of presentation or not.

Conversely, according to Garrett, the logical interpretation holds that the method is:

A rigorous (or at least an attempt at a rigorous) deductive system, moving from ground to consequence in a logically necessary manner, and thus the only form for Spinoza's subject matter – as opposed to an external structure applied to a content independent of said structure as proposed by Joachim.

[...]

One way to interpret this is to argue that Spinoza's *Ethics* is intended to exhibit the structure of nature, it is a rigorous deduction mirroring the immanent necessity of nature.¹¹

Garrett's categorization accurately reflects the similarities between Joachim and Wolfson on the matter of the synthetic method of demonstration and the relationship between the method of demonstration and the method of exposition. However, Garrett's interpretation of Joachim seems to be at odds with what Joachim actually wrote. As we saw already, for Joachim, the structure (i.e., order) is importantly *not* external!

Joachim concludes the following:

No doubt the actual order of demonstration, the actual series of propositions in the *Ethics*, does not represent the order of discovery: that is perhaps exhibited rather in the *Tractatus*. Nor does it give us the only possible method of exposition. Nor again is it, simply as geometrical demonstration, a guarantee of the truth of the system.

11. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 100–101.

Still, the method is, in Spinoza's view, adequate to the subject-matter ; and, however it may appear to us, Spinoza never for one moment imagined himself to be torturing his material into an alien mould.¹²

Joachim distinguishes the order of demonstration from the order of discovery noting that the method of exposition itself is not tied to the content, but reiterates that the form is nevertheless appropriate. Joachim does, however, agree with Wolfson that, "when mention is made of the geometrical method, people are thinking of the synthetical mode of demonstration : that which starts from the elements (definitions, axioms, postulates), and builds up its conclusions out of them in a growing series of more and more complex propositions."¹³ This is important because it reinforces the earlier remarks from Wolfson and Goldenbaum to the effect that Spinoza's method, when it is equated with the geometrical method, is easily conflated with the Euclidean exposition, which renders the demonstrative order explicit.

Both Wolfson and Joachim agree that the synthetic geometrical method of demonstration is, in effect, nothing but valid syllogistic reasoning. They also agree that Spinoza's philosophy need not have been presented in the geometrical order of exposition. Here, however, Joachim seems to take the order to be suitable, or appropriate, to the content, and in some sense internally recommended by it, whereas Wolfson seems to consider it wholly external. In fact, Joachim's view is even stronger than this. He later asserts categorically, "the form of Spinoza's exposition is essential to its matter."¹⁴ So, in this respect, Wolfson and Joachim are antipodes.

In his discussion, Garrett notes that Vance Maxwell has offered an alternative to the didactic / logical dichotomy, by instead distinguishing between (and arguing

12. Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza (Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata)*, 12.

13. *Ibid.*, 11.

14. *Ibid.*, 13.

against) so-called ‘formalist’ interpretations, such as those of Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza (Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata)*, Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, and Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*.¹⁵

For his own part, Maxwell argues that “we must hence distinguish ‘good’ method (*TdIE*) from ‘perfect’ method (*Ethics*). In short, substance is arrived at through good method, and elaborated or ‘demonstrated’ through perfect method.”¹⁶ As Maxwell indicates, this distinction tracks the transition from the *TdIE* to the *Ethics* that we analysed in Chapter 1. It is not obvious that the method of the *TdIE* is merely ‘good’, nor that the method of the *Ethics* is ‘perfect’. Neither is it clear that Spinoza could countenance such descriptions. He certainly thinks his philosophy is true, but his conception of ‘perfect’ suggests that the comparison between the two methods is illegitimate. If all that is really meant is that Spinoza has improved his thinking by the time he composes the *Ethics*, then perhaps this is true. However, as I have argued, Spinoza’s view seems hardly to have changed.

More directly, Maxwell argues contra the ‘formalists’ that Spinoza’s

conceptions of substance, knowledge and philosophical method govern, rather than are governed by, his use of geometrical definitions, axioms, propositions and figures. This fact does not amount to a Spinozan philosophy of mathematics (although such can be derived); but it does mean that Spinoza’s geometrical method can be understood and assessed only through his doctrine of deductive method as set forth in his *TdIE*.¹⁷

The last point in this passage suggests that Maxwell agrees with Joachim that the *TdIE* is necessary for understanding Spinoza’s method. As I have already argued in Chapter 1, an analysis of the *TdIE* shows that Spinoza’s view of method remains

15. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza’s Method*, 101.

16. Maxwell, “The Philosophical Method of Spinoza,” 90.

17. *Ibid.*, 92.

consistent throughout his philosophical *oeuvre*.

There remains an unclear connection between Spinoza's *theory* of method, and his *employment* of method. As clearly as Spinoza articulates his views on method, this does not guarantee that the philosophical method his system involves embodies the theoretical premises to which Spinoza claims he subscribes. For an understanding of this, Spinoza's philosophy should first be situated in its historical context. As such, I turn now to earlier accounts of method.

2.3 Earlier Methods

In order to be clear about how Spinoza's method is to be understood in relation to other historical conceptions of method, we must navigate through the remarkable variety of different terms that have been deployed to mark conceptual subtleties in both the interpretations of Spinoza's method, and in interpretations of those interpretations.¹⁸

One way of approaching the meaning of Spinoza's method would be to follow Garrett's lead and try, to some degree, to trace the actual influences on Spinoza from sources he was known to have read, or about which he could reasonably be believed to have some passing knowledge.¹⁹ I will not approach things strictly in this way, because my concern is not, primarily, to uncover the actual historical antecedents of Spinoza's ideas, but rather to try to understand Spinoza's ideas by contrast with them.

Zabarella, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes and Spinoza all have in common that each of their philosophical methods has, in turn, been seen as in some way outmoded. In part,

18. To list just a few terms used to refer to method (and order), some of which feature heavily in the previous sections and in what follows: analytic, synthetic, demonstrative, expositive, geometrical, mathematical, formal, didactic, logical, resolute, compositive, definitive, scientific, natural, historical, interpretive, habitual, instrumental, inventive, deductive...

19. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 98.

as is often taught to undergraduates, the early modern period can be characterized as a reaction to the persistence of Aristotelian ‘method’ in both its pedagogical and logical senses. Yet, the methodological developments of this period were not all successfully incorporated into modern scientific or philosophical method(s). In many cases, this rejection may be justified. Descartes and Spinoza have been widely viewed as methodologically flawed in various ways, at least since Hume.²⁰

On Baconian method, Florian Cajori writes, “Needless to say that Bacon’s method did not stand the test of experience.”²¹ Similarly, Peter Dear depressingly admits that, “ignored on the Continent and reviled in Britain, Hobbes’ methodology of the natural sciences did not outlive its creator.”²² Despite this longstanding consensus there may be good reasons to suspect that the dismal attitudes of the past were not entirely justified. One reason for some renewed optimism is that the views of these methodical philosophers have not always been fully understood, nor, in many cases, appreciated.

For one thing, both Hobbes and Spinoza argued for strongly naturalistic propositions, which were vilified at the time, but which have, in some respects, become generally accepted as modern *status quo*. Jonathan Israel has remarked (perhaps mildly overstating the significance):

Admittedly, in Britain many (but by no means all) writers deemed Hobbes more widely pervasive than Spinoza as a promoter of freethinking, irreligion, and incredulity. But given Hobbes’ politics, and his attitude to ecclesiastical power and censorship, as well as his being (by his own admission) philosophically less bold and comprehensive, he simply was not, and could not have been, the source and inspiration for a systematic redefinition of man, cosmology, politics, social hierarchy, sexuality, and ethics in the radical sense Spinoza was. When placed in a full historical context, Spinoza evidently had no real rival even in

20. Compare this with the negative attitude toward speculative metaphysics advanced by Peter Strawson in the twentieth century.

21. Cajori, “The Baconian Method of Scientific Research,” 87.

22. Sorrell, *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, 103.

England as the chief progenitor and author of ‘that hideous hypothesis’, as Hume (ironically?) called it, the ‘doctrine of simplicity of the universe, and the unity of that substance, in which [Spinoza] supposes both thought and matter to inhere’, eliminating divine Providence and governance of the world, in other words, the Naturalistic, materialist, one-substance undercurrent culminating in La Mettrie and Diderot.²³

Setting aside Israel’s somewhat hagiographic championing of Spinoza as the force behind the entire Enlightenment, reevaluations such as Israel’s suggest that there is much more to be said, and worth saying, about the methods of these two great early moderns.

More importantly, Spinoza’s philosophy, though currently experiencing something of a renaissance, is (and is widely acknowledged to be) notoriously difficult. It is not unreasonable to believe that the geometrical method (and its sometime-Euclidean form) is at the heart of much of this difficulty. If Spinoza and Hobbes have anything to offer us, it is unlikely to be as a result of retaining late-medieval Aristotelian method of demonstration, or of pedagogy. Furthermore, Spinoza’s philosophy is so deeply associated with the geometrical method and the Euclidean order that this must be accounted for in any attempt to reinvigorate his views.

In what follows, I will begin with Zabarella, whose works *De Methodis* and *De Regressus* influenced numerous scholars including Galileo, Descartes, and Hobbes, in the development of modern scientific method. Unlike Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes and Spinoza all argue for a human nature subject to the same method of examination and inquiry—because it involves the same laws and necessity—as the rest of the natural world.

Before delving into the more difficult task of reconstructing the respective views on method of Zabarella, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza, I will begin with

23. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 159.

some brief evidence of an overarching connection between them.

2.3.1 General Connections

Zabarella begins the preface of *On Methods* with the following general assessment:

It is manifest that every science, every art, and every discipline is conveyed by some method and cannot endure without method. For in no branch of learning can anyone teach well, unless both in disposing its parts and in clarifying every theorem, and in conveying knowledge of hidden things, he maintains some method.²⁴

Zabarella sees a clear connection between method and the transfer of knowledge, which provides us with *prima facie* evidence favouring a didactic interpretation of the use of *any* method.²⁵

Compare this with Hobbes' remark that:

The cause, therefore, of civil war is, that men know not the causes neither of war nor peace, there being but few in the world that have learned those duties which unite and keep men in peace, that is to say, that have learned the rules of civil life sufficiently. Now, the knowledge of these rules is moral philosophy. But why have they not learned them, unless for this reason, that none hitherto have taught them in a clear and exact method?²⁶

Here, Hobbes recognizes the need for a method in the moral and political realms.

Compare this with the following infamous remark from Spinoza:

The affects, therefore, of hate, anger, envy, and the like, considered in themselves, follow with the same necessity and force of Nature as the other singular things. And therefore they acknowledge certain causes, through which they

24. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 3.

25. That is, at least at the outset, Zabarella relegates method to the conveyance of what is already known, rather than the discovery of anything new. But this is only the beginning of the treatise, and Zabarella has yet to establish his own notion of method.

26. Hobbes et al., *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 8.

are understood, and have certain properties, as worthy of our knowledge as the properties of any other thing, by the mere contemplation of which we are pleased. Therefore, I shall treat the nature and powers of the affects, and the power of the mind over them, by the same method by which, in the preceding parts, I treated God and the mind, and I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies.²⁷

Spinoza does not explicitly refer to a method for politics or morality here, but there are good reasons to suspect that these are his ultimate targets.

In order to understand just what sort of thing method is that it could be treated as fundamental to *every* avenue of human inquiry, let's begin with a reconstruction of Zabarella's account before proceeding to the accounts of method in Hobbes, Bacon, and Descartes. Having accounted for the development of method I will argue that, in contrast with Descartes, and despite some stark differences, Bacon, Hobbes and Spinoza each adopt a strikingly similar method which, if applied to human beings without compromise, generates the possibility of both a naturalized morality and a scientific politics.

2.3.2 Zabarella

'Method' in Zabarella's time is understood as the 'common genus' of methods and orders. According to Peter Dear, "The principle locus in the seventeenth century for method as a philosophical genre was the logic text... Its characterization varied little and usually followed Zabarella's distinction between method as an overall ordering of a subject-matter (*ordo*) and method as a logical technique of discovery (*methodus*, properly so called)."²⁸ As we'll see, the notion of a logical technique of discovery is very important for Descartes. It's also worth noting that Spinoza's *Ethics* is by his

27. II/138/20-25. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 492.

28. Dear, "Method and the study of nature," 148.

own admission ‘*ordine geometrico*’. The way in which both of these track or diverge from Zabarella’s distinctions should become clear as we proceed.

For Zabarella, the ‘broad sense’ of method is “nothing other than a logical habit, or an instrumental habit of [the] understanding that serves us in obtaining knowledge of things.”²⁹ This might seem to suggest a broader purview for method than he initially offers, if “obtaining knowledge” means discovering it. But this phrase is ambiguous between discovery of new knowledge and merely obtaining knowledge that has already been discovered. If Zabarella means the latter only, then method remains purely didactic in function. Zabarella further distinguishes two types of method:³⁰

1. instrumental habit (not yet applied)
2. the discipline (to which instrumental habit is applied)

However, he clarifies that his purpose is to deal only with ‘the nature of method itself’, which falls under the first type, instrumental habit.

The second type is ‘mathematical or natural method’, which Zabarella takes to require discussion of ‘the nature of things and the nature of the sciences themselves’.³¹ The nature of method, in this sense, is not a matter of summarizing the details of any particular methods. Zabarella designates method as a unique non-corporeal instrument, i.e., formal, as distinguished from all the other instruments (or methods) which are material.³² This instrument is described as “a habit in man’s soul. . . it is an instrument invented not for signifying but for procuring scientific knowledge.”³³ This instrument, however is not perfectly defined in this way, Zabarella suggests, on the

29. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 7.

30. *Ibid.*, 9.

31. Spinoza repeatedly insists that his main concern is to discuss the nature of things, and this suggests that his method is intended to be precisely a mathematical-natural one.

32. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 11.

33. *Ibid.*

authority of Aristotle, who “taught that the definition of an accident is not perfect, even if it is essential and equal in total extent to what is defined, unless it expresses the external cause upon which the accident depends.”³⁴ To perfect the definition of method Zabarella adds, “[s]ince method therefore is an instrument, and the principal cause of an instrument is the end itself, we added into the definition. . . a final cause, which is the knowledge to be acquired by us by means of the method.”³⁵ But here, Zabarella admits that this would seem to imply that methods amount to “ways of teaching. . . since the name of teaching signifies the very end of method.”³⁶ So, Zabarella argues, we must reject teaching as the genus of ‘orders and methods’, since this would render the aim of a method to be the teaching of that method, which is accidental to the nature of the method itself. The genus of method is, Zabarella concludes, “none other than habit of mind’, the differentia of which are instrumental. The final cause is not teaching, but knowledge of things, “whether to be acquired by the same person or to be conveyed to others.”³⁷

Having established the genus of method,³⁸ Zabarella turns to its species, which he

34. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 13.

35. *Ibid.*, 15.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 17.

38. Zabarella inserts a semi-formal argument here which proceeds as follows:

Whatever is essential to some thing and is accepted in its definition, either as genus or as differentia, is utterly inseparable from that thing, just as there cannot be a man that is not animal and that is not rational. But there can be both order and method as habits in the soul of a man who never teaches them to anyone. There can, therefore, be order and method to which the name of teaching, thus accepted, is not appropriate. Therefore teaching is neither their genus nor their differentia. So according to this signification, it should not be accepted in their definitions. (Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 18–19)

notes “is familiar and commonplace enough that it has to be accepted and approved.”³⁹ The species of method in its broad sense are: order and method. These are distinguished in the following way: “to dispose is proper to order, and to make known [is proper] to method.”⁴⁰ Thus, under the umbrella of method, we have order as distinguished from ‘method distinguished properly’. According to what Zabarella says next, the focus must now be shifted to order, because:

...any author about to write down or convey some science or art considers before all else in what order the parts of his discipline have to be disposed. Afterward he inquires after the method in each part that leads from the knowns into knowledge of those things that are unknown and are inquired after.⁴¹

Accordingly, Zabarella takes order to be “something more universal” and to “extend more broadly than does method’, characterizing yet another difference between them according to which “in order, we regard a science as a universal whole and compare its parts to each other, whereas method consists in the investigation of one thing inquired after without comparison of any of the science’s parts to each other.”⁴² Zabarella’s discussion of order proceeds at length, for the rest of *Book I*.

Zabarella argues that what others have said about order must be wrong for a variety of reasons. He sides with Averroës in defence of the view that “the rational way of ordering the sciences and all the disciplines is not taken from the nature itself of the things being considered but from our better and easier knowledge.”⁴³ The reason for this is that “we dispose some science in one way rather than another, not because this is the natural order of things being considered as they are outside man’s soul,

39. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 19.

40. *Ibid.*, 21.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 29.

but because in that way the science can be learned better and more easily by all.”⁴⁴ Notice that here order is defined in terms of its pedagogical / didactic strength,⁴⁵ and what we are talking about is not the order of nature, but rather, the order in which we endeavour to describe or explain (or teach) nature. Zabarella concludes that “the order of teachings is from things more known to us.”⁴⁶

In the remaining discussion, a number of distinctions are introduced, some more useful than others. Knowledge is divided into imperfect (or confused) and perfect (or distinct) types. The latter type is divided into absolutely perfect knowledge and knowledge perfect in genus.⁴⁷ Furthermore, knowledge is also divided in terms of what is ‘more known’ and what is ‘less known’ (see the definition of order above), and the former is divided in terms of either contributing ‘to obtaining knowledge of [the less known]’ or ‘it does not contribute to knowing it’. Zabarella tells us that the latter must be left aside because it “has a place neither in order nor in method.”⁴⁸ The former is again subdivided into three branches: first, “inasmuch as it is the cause of knowledge of the other’, second “something necessary for gaining knowledge of [the other]” or “the cause *sine qua non*”, and third, “because knowledge of it is useful.”⁴⁹ “From all of this”, Zabarella declares, “the whole nature of order becomes manifest, as does the difference between order and method taken properly.”⁵⁰ Yet he does not stop here.

44. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 29.

45. This focus on didactic strength comes up again in the discussion of the purpose behind Spinoza’s method. There is, for Spinoza, a question about whether the *Ethics* so ordered is intended to represent the order of Nature or to simply aid understanding.

46. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 47. Spinoza agrees with this, but places God or Nature and its laws at the foundation, so that the didactic and natural-logical orders seem to coincide.

47. *Ibid.*, 49.

48. *Ibid.*, 51.

49. *Ibid.*, 51–53.

50. *Ibid.*, 53.

Another distinction is introduced between order and method: method “makes an inference of this thing from that”, whereas order “insofar as it is order, is not argumentation and, according to the proper nature of order itself, makes no inference of one thing from another thing.”⁵¹ Zabarella concludes that this is “the discriminating difference between order and method” because it involves their essential characteristics. So we have arrived at Zabarella’s view concerning the nature of method, and its species, order and method. At this stage in his discussion, Zabarella turns to the utility of order and method. In order to clarify the method we need to know not merely what it is, but what its value might be.

The utility of method is “to bring about knowledge, of that which is unknown’, whereas the utility of order is “that by means of it we are taught better and more easily.” In the former case, what is hidden is made apparent, but in the latter there is no such power. As a result, “[o]rder and method... contribute to knowledge in different ways’, of which method pertains to both distinct and confused knowledge, but order only pertains to distinct knowledge. Zabarella takes it to follow from this that in order, “a treatment on the genus necessarily precedes a treatment on the species.”⁵²⁵³ In the discussion of order and its utility that follows, there are a number of important distinctions including:⁵⁴

3. ‘better’ / ‘more easily’, which express ‘the whole utility of order’.
4. the rational way of ordering all disciplines is divided in two, such that they are disposed either
 - (a) ‘on account of the necessity of perfect and distinct scientific knowledge’ or

51. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 57.

52. *Ibid.*, 61.

53. This distinction is clearly maintained in Spinoza’s prioritization of the whole over its parts, though the Aristotelian flavour of Zabarella’s account is dropped.

54. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 63.

(b) ‘on account of greater ease in teaching’.

Finally, order (of teaching) is defined as “an instrumental habit by means of which we are able so to dispose the parts of any discipline that the discipline may be learned as optimally and as easily as can be.”⁵⁵

Zabarella uses Euclid’s *Elements* to illustrate his point, which is that sometimes the accidents of the species need to be considered first, before turning to the accidents of the genus, precisely because order aims at ease of teaching. This is especially important given that the overarching aim of the chapter is to trace the development of geometrical method and thus to better understand Spinoza’s (and perhaps also Hobbes’) peculiar philosophy and opaque method. Zabarella argues insightfully that,

...there is no demonstration in Euclid’s earlier four books that presupposes any of the demonstrations that are made in the fifth book, just as no demonstration in the fifth book depends on any of the ones that had been made in those four books. From this is it patent that no necessity in teaching forced Euclid to begin with either the first or with the fifth book. He could have taken the start of the treatment from either. But nonetheless, on account of greater ease, he wanted to start from the first book, not from the fifth, not because knowledge of the first book renders knowledge of the fifth easier, but because the demonstrations of the first book are easier to understand absolutely. Those made in the fifth are very difficult.⁵⁶

As far as Zabarella is concerned the *order* of the demonstrations of the *Elements* can be shown to be primarily didactic, rather than logical. Indeed, he provides as further evidence the fact that “after six books of the *Elements* on geometry, [Euclid] placed the seventh, eighth, and ninth on arithmetic... Afterward, in the tenth book, he returns to magnitude.”⁵⁷ With this settled, Zabarella concludes Book I of *On Methods*.

55. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 71.

56. *Ibid.*, 89.

57. *Ibid.*, 91.

In Book II, the subject turns to the division and species of order, which begins with long discussions of Aristotle and Galen on the subject of the various sciences and arts, in which the definitions of compositive and resolute order (taken from Aristotle and Plato) are clarified. Ultimately, Zabarella adheres to the teleological line regarding the resolute order, which “aims toward beginning principles.”⁵⁸ More interestingly, Zabarella also considers a third order, namely, ‘definitive order’, again taken from Aristotle. To summarize,

Zabarella takes,

5. compositive order “to be directed to scientific knowledge as to an ultimate end.”⁵⁹

And,

6. resolute order “is a logical instrument [for] disposing, by which we progress from a notion of the end, which can be generated and produced by a man practicing freely, to discovering and coming to know beginning-principles.”⁶⁰

The second book ends with a distinction between universal and particular order. The former is ‘that by which we dispose the whole discipline’, and the latter ‘that which is maintained in any part of the discipline’. Zabarella insists that there is no need for the parts of a discipline to entirely match the order of their whole, and with that turns to what he has termed ‘method’.

Zabarella begins the third book by reminding the reader of what has already been said. The discussion thus far has been somewhat complicated by the use of the term ‘method’ for both the genus under which order and method fall, and the species ‘method’ which, as we have seen, is distinct from order. The remainder of *On Methods* focuses explicitly on the species.

58. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 1: Books I-II*, 251.

59. *Ibid.*, 255.

60. *Ibid.*, 261.

The genus of method is ‘instrument of [the] understanding’, and the differentia of the species method from the species order is “to bring about knowledge of [what is now] unknown from [things now] known.”⁶¹ Here, Zabarella notes that this differentia ultimately “signifies nothing other than the necessity of inference; when progression is such that by it something is gathered from something [else] necessarily, this is properly called method.”⁶² Without this focus on inference and necessity, there would be no distinction between the species of method and order.

Zabarella next introduces an interesting corollary: “method appears to be nothing other than syllogism.”⁶³ At this stage it would seem that Zabarella’s conception of the species of method is simply the Aristotelian notion of a deductive syllogism. Given that his suggestion is that method is differentiated from order solely in terms of necessity of inference, and that this is precisely what characterizes stock Aristotelian syllogistic logic at the time, Zabarella’s claim looks quite straightforward. Zabarella, however, is not merely a naïve Aristotelian commentator, but a careful reader and a sometimes astute philosopher, as in this case where he introduces further nuance:

The name ‘method,’... is somewhat narrower than syllogism, for it signifies syllogism as directed to the obtaining of knowledge and as it is the common genus of all instruments for knowing scientifically... Now the dialectical and oratorical syllogisms are not properly said to be methods, because they only have the form of method but do not have the matter appropriate for the obtaining of scientific knowledge...⁶⁴

The ensuing discussion of Aristotle, Alexander, and Philoponus results in Zabarella affirming that indeed, disregarding dialectical and oratorical syllogisms as non-methods,

61. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 2: Books III-IV. On Regressus*, 5.

62. *Ibid.*, 7.

63. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 2: Books III-IV. On Regressus*, 11. Cf. Wolfson’s claim about synthetic geometrical method.

64. *Ibid.*, 15.

“syllogism is the common genus of all methods and logical instruments.”⁶⁵

From here, Zabarella differentiates species of method (the species now treated as universal). The discussion begins with a standard Aristotelian division of method into ‘demonstrative’ and ‘resolutive’ methods, though he renames the former ‘compositive’.⁶⁶

The distinction is this:

7. “resolution is said to be a progression from effect to cause”
8. “that which is from cause to effect may be called composition”

Zabarella notes that inductive method is categorized under resolution, which is a straightforward inference from the fact that inductive inference does not proceed according to necessity of cause and effect, but, roughly, from prior effects to a common cause of some future effect. For Zabarella, these constitute the only scientific method. The early modern period will constitute, in part, a definitive refutation of this aspect of Zabarella’s thinking, but the precise manner in which this proceeds is unclear.

In the ensuing chapters, Zabarella takes himself to have refuted two additional purported methods, namely, ‘divisive’, and ‘definitive’. The former, understood as “the division of genera into species by means of essential differentiae”⁶⁷, is better understood as “a minister or handmaid of logical instruments”, i.e., “an order, or part of an order, or at least a minister.”⁶⁸ Regarding the purported ‘definitive’ method, Zabarella refutes it with the following argument:

Definition, therefore, since it is a word, cannot be said to be method and logical instrument insofar as it signifies the concept of the quiddity of something. And those who say this by the same reasoning ought to confess that all speech and

65. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 2: Books III-IV. On Regressus*, 21.

66. *Ibid.*, 25.

67. *Ibid.*, 33.

68. *Ibid.*, 71.

every word is a method and a logical instrument, for all speech and every name signifies some thing. But to assert this is so very absurd.⁶⁹

Here, Zabarella is at pains to avoid accusing Aristotle of a monumental blunder.⁷⁰

His solution is to suggest that

We do not want to refute definitive method so as to destroy every method by which an unknown definition is investigated, but only to show that there is no definitive method as distinct from the others. . . Nevertheless, we say that what he will call definitive is in truth demonstrative or resolute.⁷¹

We are thus left with two methods: demonstrative (or compositive) and resolute.

Zabarella tells us that “the goal of the resolute method. . . is not to know the number of constitutive parts [of some thing], but only to know that they are.”⁷² Zabarella defers to the authority of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* to provide the definition of demonstrative method, according to which “demonstrative method is a syllogism bringing forth scientific knowledge from premises that are necessary, lacking a middle, more known, and the causes of the conclusion.”⁷³ This is an important claim. Zabarella’s maintenance of the Aristotelian definition raises questions about the degree to which Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza diverge from this insofar as they employ demonstrative methods.

Often it seems as if Zabarella is merely reiterating and commenting on Aristotle’s views, and this is at least partially true, but the distinct path Zabarella follows, beginning with a genus and then seeking species, produces a markedly clear and distinct development of the concepts of method and order, which we shall soon be

69. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 2: Books III-IV. On Regressus*, 93.

70. Cf. Aristotle *Prior Analytics* I. 31 in Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation, One-Volume Digital Edition*.

71. *Ibid.*, 97.

72. *Ibid.*, 129.

73. *Ibid.*, 145.

able to compare with the notoriously non-Aristotelian picture of these same concepts in Hobbes and Spinoza. One such helpful clarification Zabarella offers is that “[t]he beginning-principles of demonstrative method are, therefore, discovered by resolute method, some by induction alone and some by demonstration *a signo*.”⁷⁴ The upshot of this is that “there are only two methods or two instruments for knowing scientifically – demonstrative method and resolute method, which is servant to demonstrative method, since resolution occurs for the sake of composition, so as to furnish it with beginning-principles.”⁷⁵

Here, we might wonder what exactly Zabarella has in mind by ‘beginning-principles’. The answer is definitions: “definition has to be said to be either the beginning-principle (*principium*) or the end (*finis*) of logical methods – the beginning-principle when it is known, of course, and the end when it is unknown and investigated by means of logical instruments.”⁷⁶ In the chapters that follow, Zabarella suggests various species of definition, and offers defences of these from Aristotle and Averroës.

Every method, says Zabarella, is *definitive*, in the sense outlined above, but there is no independent *definitive* method. Likewise, *resolute* method is useful only for producing beginning-principles from which we can demonstrate scientific knowledge, and so it too is given a secondary status. From all of this, we arrive at the conclusion that “. . . there is only one logical instrument, demonstrative method.”⁷⁷

74. Zabarella, *On Methods, Volume 2: Books III-IV. On Regressus*, 155.

75. *Ibid.*, 231.

76. *Ibid.*, 255.

77. *Ibid.*, 305.

2.3.3 Hobbes

Hobbes largely inherits the Zabarellan framework, but as Peter Dear notes, “he differs, crucially, from Zabarella on the power of the resolute and compositive methods.”⁷⁸

Dear concludes that:

Hobbes’s position was idiosyncratic. Talk of method usually sanctioned the possibility of knowledge rather than its impossibility. Hobbes’s denial of a truly demonstrative natural philosophy did not, of course, prevent him from developing his own accounts of the physical world, but these . . . held the status of the ‘most rational’ rather than the ‘necessarily true’.⁷⁹

Dear’s discussion is instructive but brief, so we should look for more direct textual evidence with which to characterize Hobbes’ position. In an early chapter of *Leviathan* Hobbes explicitly proclaims:

And of men, those are of all most subject to [absurdity] that professe philosophy. For it is most true that Cicero sayth of them somewhere; that there can be nothing so absurd, but may be found in the books of Philosophers. And the reason is manifest. For there is not one of them that begins his ratiocination from the Definitions, or Explications of the names they are to use; which is a method that hath been used onely in Geometry, whose Conclusions have thereby been made indisputable.⁸⁰

This polemical passage presages similar remarks (including nods to Cicero’s scepticism about philosophers) in Spinoza’s writings.⁸¹ But what is most important here is that Hobbes conceives of method as the solution to the problem of absurdity in philosophy. Not just any method, but geometrical method—Hobbes’ overconfidence about the robustness of Euclidean geometry notwithstanding. In fact, Hobbes’ commitment to this method is so strong that he appears to use it to define science:

78. Dear, “Method and the study of nature,” 152.

79. *Ibid.*, 152–153.

80. Hobbes, *Hobbes: Leviathan: Revised student edition*, 34.

81. See: 3DALIV. Exp.

... it appears that Reason is not as Sense, and Memory, born with us; nor gotten by Experience onely, as Prudence is; but attained by Industry; first in apt imposing of Names; and secondly by getting a good and orderly Method in proceeding from the Elements, which are Names, to Assertions made by Connexion of one of them to another; and so to Syllogismes, which are the Connexions of one Assertion to another, till we come to a knowledge of all the Consequences of names appertaining to the subject in hand; and that is it, men call science.⁸²

From this, we can see that Hobbes maintains the Zabarellan connection of syllogism to a method of discovery (i.e., ‘science’). If this is not enough evidence to be convinced that Hobbes takes geometrical method very seriously, let me quote one more example to make the case airtight:

The skill of making and maintaining Common-wealths consisteth in certain Rules, as doth Arithmetic and Geometry; not (as Tennis-play) on Practise only: which Rules, neither poor men have the leisure, nor men that have had the leisure, have hitherto had the curiosity, or the method to find out.⁸³

Hobbes’ optimism about the geometrical method is, in truth, a more common feature of seventeenth-century English naturalist philosophy. Take, for example, the following remark from Thomas White:

And for want of this, so many of the Ancients and Moderns have not own’d, but corrupted, the evidence of that very first and most notorious Principle. Whence they can never attain that Scientifical Method which shines so clear in Arithmetick and Geometry, but are wholly entangled in Logical and Equivocal trifles; and fill babbling Volumes with fopperies. Let these lusty Compilers of Tomes shew the world but one leaf, or one page deduc’d or at least attempted in a Geometrical Method; and then, let them complain there’s no Science, or that it lies hid in an unfathomable Well: now the sordid Sluggards, only mettlesome at reproaches conceit a Lion in the way, and stir not a foot, so much as to behold the very way.⁸⁴

82. Hobbes, *Hobbes: Leviathan: Revised student edition*, 35.

83. *Ibid.*, 145.

84. White, *An Exclusion of Scepticks from All Title to Dispute: Being an Answer to the Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 54.

White's claims verge on the merely rhetorical, but they express an optimistic desire for science and human knowledge to move beyond the past. The desire to extend the certainty of geometry and arithmetic to other domains persists beyond the Seventeenth Century, finding an echo in Kant:

It took natural science much longer to find the highway of science; for it is only about one and a half centuries since the suggestion of the ingenious Francis Bacon partly occasioned this discovery and partly further stimulated it, since one was already on its tracks – which discovery, therefore, can just as much be explained by a sudden revolution in the way of thinking.⁸⁵

Douglas Jesseph presents the standard account of method and geometry in Hobbes' thinking, according to which "Hobbes took geometry as the idea for all demonstrative knowledge."⁸⁶ More importantly, however, Jesseph gives us a clue as to the way in which scientific investigation and explanation is changing in the early modern period, noting "Hobbes intends his claims for the special scientific status of geometry to apply not so much to the traditional geometry of Euclid, but rather to his own reformulation of the subject that proceeds from definitions that express the true causes of geometric objects."⁸⁷ Here we should turn back to Hobbes' own words to see precisely how his conception of method differs from Zabarella's. In the *Elements of Philosophy*, Hobbes devotes all of chapter VI to *method*. He derives a definition of the term 'method' from the definition of philosophy, which goes as follows:

Philosophy is the knowledge we acquire, by true ratiocination, of appearances, or apparent effects, from the knowledge we have of some possible production or generation of the same; and of such production as has been or may be, from the knowledge we have of effects. Method, therefore, in the study of philosophy, is

85. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 108.

86. Sorrell, *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, 87.

87. *Ibid.*

the shortest way of finding out effects by their known causes, or of causes by their known effects.⁸⁸

Hobbes' understanding of method clearly follows along roughly the same terminological terrain as that of Zabarella. Having defined the general notion of method above, Hobbes remarks that “[t]here is therefore no method by which we find out the causes of things, but is either compositive or resolute, or partly compositive, and partly resolute. And the resolute is commonly called analytical method, as the compositive is called synthetical.”⁸⁹ This synthesis of the two methods for the purpose of discovering causes marks the first contrast between Hobbes and Zabarella. Where Zabarella determines that the resolute method is only useful for producing ‘beginning-principles’, Hobbes takes the resolute, or analytical method to be useful for “attaining to the universal knowledge of things.”⁹⁰ Here, however, Hobbes denies the need for method to discover the causes of universal things. Such causes are “manifest of themselves. . . so that they need no method at all; for they have all but one universal cause, which is motion.”⁹¹ The knowledge of these self-manifested causes and universal things is “in the first place their definitions, (which are nothing but the explication of our simple conceptions.)”⁹² Once we have these definitions of simple conceptions, which Hobbes takes to be ultimately a matter of motions, we can discover the effects of these motions through the compositive method. This discovery, of “what motion begets such and such effects; as, what motion makes a straight line, and what a circular; what motion thrusts, what draws, and by what way; what makes a thing which is seen or heard. . .” is, Hobbes identifies, “that part of philosophy which is

88. Hobbes et al., *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 65–66.

89. *Ibid.*, 66.

90. *Ibid.*, 69.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*, 70.

called *geometry*.” So, for Hobbes, geometry—the study of simple figures and their motions—is foundational. From here, Hobbes builds up the order of science from geometry to motion to physics, which Hobbes takes to be constitutive of the entirety of natural philosophy.⁹³ Hobbes’ next move is to tie moral philosophy to this method, in which realm

we are to consider the motions of the mind, namely, appetite, aversion, love, benevolence, hope, fear, anger, emulation, envy, &c.; what causes they have, and of what they be causes. And the reason why these are to be considered after physics is, that they have their causes in sense and imagination, which are the subject of physical contemplation.⁹⁴

Hobbes’ demarcation of philosophy into natural and moral philosophy should strike the reader as somewhat artificial. Hobbes’ identification of the causes of the motions of the mind with the subject of *physical* contemplation would seem to place moral philosophy squarely in the realm of natural philosophy. It might seem, then, that in order to study moral philosophy, Hobbes would have us operate according to his recommended order in natural philosophy, from definitions of universal things which require no method, to geometry according to the compositive method, which allows us to come to physics, and only then move on to moral conceptions. But the distinction between natural and moral philosophy is, for Hobbes, more complicated. Both analytic and synthetic methods can be employed to attain knowledge of civil and moral philosophy, because “even they also that have not learned in the first part of philosophy, namely, geometry and physics, may, notwithstanding, attain the principles of civil philosophy, by the analytical method.”⁹⁵ Accordingly, Hobbes argues, “the method of philosophy, to such as seek science simply, without propounding to

93. Hobbes et al., *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 72.

94. *Ibid.*, 72–73.

95. *Ibid.*, 74.

themselves the solution of any particular question, is partly analytical, and partly synthetical; namely, that which proceeds from sense to the invention of principles, analytical; and the rest synthetical.”⁹⁶ Hobbes goes on to explain in some detail the different ways in which philosophical investigations not only are, but need to be, partially analytical and partially synthetical. He then remarks that he had been discussing only what he calls the ‘method of invention’. This seems to be equivalent to the method of discovery.⁹⁷

Hobbes’ view of method (of invention, or discovery) can now be summarized as follows:

	Invention	Exposition
Resolutive / Analytic	Partially	Euclidean: Perhaps
Compositive / Synthetic	Partially	Euclidean: Perhaps

There is another method, which Hobbes calls the “method of teaching, that is, of demonstration.”⁹⁸ This appears to track Zabarella’s distinction between methods properly speaking, and order as outlined in the previous section. It remains to be seen, however, whether Hobbes’ view of ‘method of demonstration’ differs in any way from the view of *order* offered by Zabarella. Hobbes is clear on this point: the method

96. Hobbes et al., *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 74–75.

97. Diane Steinberg has argued that “Spinoza rejected the analytic method of demonstration for his philosophy, choosing instead to give a geometric presentation, and... was never able to formulate a method of discovery.” (Steinberg, “Method and the structure of knowledge in Spinoza,” 164) If accurate, this marks an important difference between Hobbes and Spinoza. Steinberg attempts to answer the question of why Spinoza did this. She concludes, “if justification for Spinoza is nonlinear, then there is no method of discovery which proceeds linearly, from one completely justified certainty to the next, and there is no possibility of an analytic demonstration in the Cartesian sense.” (ibid., 165) Against Steinberg’s interpretation, Charles Huenemann has recently argued that “The geometrical method then is not just a manner of exposition. It is also a method of discovery, since by practicing it a philosopher attains deeper insight into what can be proven from a certain set of axioms, definitions, and postulates.” (Huenemann, “But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?,” 130) I return to Huenemann’s interpretation in Chapter 6.

98. Ibid., 79.

of teaching is, with one step omitted, the same as the method by which we gained knowledge of our ‘inventions’ (those things we discover via the method of invention).

The reason for this is that:

teaching is nothing but leading the mind of him we teach, to the knowledge of our inventions, in that track by which we attained the same with our own mind; therefore, the same method that served for our invention, will serve also for demonstration to others, saving that we omit the firsts part of method which proceeded from the sense of things to universal principles, which, because they are principles, cannot be demonstrated. . . The whole method, therefore, of demonstration, is synthetical, consisting of that order of speech which begins from primary or most universal propositions, which are manifest of themselves, and proceeds by a perpetual composition of propositions into syllogisms...⁹⁹

The language of principles, method, and syllogism is the same as that of Zabarella, but unlike Zabarella, Hobbes denies that the ‘method of teaching’ can be resolute. For Zabarella, recall, there is both a resolute and a compositive order, both of which are aimed toward ‘better’ or ‘more easily’ learning something. Hobbes’ denial of this implies, as he says, that beginning principles cannot be taught since there is nothing out of which they could be composed. For Hobbes it seems that there could be no procedure via which a teacher could guide students to employ a resolute method that arrives at these principles. The teacher must, rather, begin with these principles.

Hobbes divides the principles into two sorts: “names, that signify such things as have some conceivable cause”, and “names as signify things of which we can conceive no cause at all.”¹⁰⁰ Hobbes then suggests that “definitions of things, which may be understood to have some cause, must consist of such names as express the cause or manner of their generation.”¹⁰¹ The reason for this is that

99. Hobbes et al., *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 80.

100. *Ibid.*, 81.

101. *Ibid.*

[t]he end of science is the demonstration of the causes and generations of things; which if they be not in the definitions, they cannot be found in the conclusion of the first syllogism, that is, made from those definitions; and if they be not in the first conclusion, they will not be found in any further conclusion deduced from that; and, therefore, by proceeding in this manner, we shall never come to science.¹⁰²

Hobbes then remarks that the axioms of Euclid do not count as principles of demonstration, because they themselves may be demonstrated, even though they need not be.¹⁰³ Next, we receive a definition of demonstration, such that “a demonstration is a syllogism, or a series of syllogisms, derived and continued, from the definitions of names, to the last conclusion.”¹⁰⁴ Finally, Hobbes remarks concerning the notion of method he has propounded, “that this method ought to be kept in all sorts of philosophy, is evidence from hence, that such things as I have said are to be taught last, cannot be demonstrated, till such as are propounded to be first treated of, be fully understood.”¹⁰⁵

Hobbes concludes Part I of the *Elements* by suggesting that this method he has argued for at length is exemplified in the remaining parts of the *Elements*, i.e., in his own *order* of philosophizing. Now, since he has denied a distinction between the order of discovery and the order of teaching, it follows that for Hobbes, the order in which he presents his philosophy in the *Elements* is the order in which he takes himself to have discovered it, save for the resolution of the definitions in the first place.

With this reconstruction of Hobbes’ view of method completed, I turn now to brief discussions of Bacon and Descartes. In the process, we shall aim to uncover to what degree method has progressed from Zabarella to Spinoza.

102. Hobbes et al., *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 81–82.

103. *Ibid.*, 82.

104. *Ibid.*, 86.

105. *Ibid.*, 87–88.

2.3.4 Bacon

In a recent comparative essay, Daniel Selcer rightly admits “It may be difficult to imagine an early-modern philosopher further removed from Bacon than Spinoza.”¹⁰⁶ Yet, he goes on to suggest that “both Bacon and Spinoza are easily described as belonging to what we now historiographically but somewhat anachronistically identify as the unfolding of early-modern ontological (if not methodological) naturalism.”¹⁰⁷

In Chapter 1, we saw that there is a clear sense in which Spinoza is a methodological monist. It seems clear from Spinoza’s identification of God and Nature that he is, therefore, also unquestionably a methodological naturalist. However, naturalism has changed meaning somewhat over the centuries, so that it is now unclear that Spinoza would easily be classed among the naturalists of today. Nevertheless, Selcer’s investigation illuminates just how familiar Spinoza was with Bacon. Selcer concludes that Spinoza derives an account of essence from Bacon, according to which there is a “relation of mutual dependence between forms and the natures they inform.”¹⁰⁸ However, “Bacon and Spinoza differ with respect to the criterion of *conceivability*.”¹⁰⁹ For Selcer, Bacon’s methodology differs from Spinoza precisely because on Bacon’s view, “Knowledge of forms will be generated neither through syllogistic argument nor *a priori* demonstration, but through the experimental and natural-historical investigation of phenomena, their tabular organization and the careful and step-wise induction of axioms.”¹¹⁰ Recall the discussion of ‘history’ from the previous chapter. There, we

106. Selcer, “From scientia operativa to scientia intuitiva: Producing particulars in Bacon and Spinoza,” 43.

107. Ibid.

108. Ibid., 47.

109. Ibid.

110. Ibid.

saw that the mature Spinoza's methodological monism demands that his historically-driven method of interpretation of scripture be one and the same as the method of the investigation of nature. I argued that Spinoza's methodology can withstand the threat of incoherence, but this requires approaching knowledge of anything in a way that is compatible with knowledge of its (causal) history. There remains a question of whether Spinoza's own natural-historical approach is compatible with Bacon's. Here I will just suggest that if Spinoza's method can include non-syllogistic, non-*a priori* demonstrations, then Selcer's appraisal is premature.

2.4 A Cartesian Method?

To what extent is Spinoza Cartesian? Certainly, there is evidence to support both the massive influence that Descartes' philosophy must have had on Spinoza, and also Spinoza's own clear misgivings about many Cartesian doctrines.¹¹¹

Summarizing Descartes' view, Diane Steinberg writes that "One can follow the geometric order employing either the analytic or the synthetic method of demonstration. The analytic method leads the reader methodically to the discovery of the thing, but has the disadvantage of leaving implicit much that is required to convince her. By contrast, synthesis [demonstrates] its conclusions clearly from explicitly stated definitions, postulates, and axioms, thus compelling assent in the reader."¹¹² This strictly Cartesian picture can be summarized as follows:

111. As Tad Schmaltz notes, "In order to illustrate the importance of Descartes for Spinoza, it suffices to point out that Spinoza's first published work—indeed, the only work he published under his own name during his lifetime." (Schmaltz, "Spinoza and Descartes," 63)

112. Steinberg, "Method and the structure of knowledge in Spinoza," 153.

	Demonstration	Exposition
Analytic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discovery: Yes 2. Implicit Evidence 	Euclidean: Perhaps
Synthetic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discovery: No.¹¹³ 2. Explicit Evidence 	Euclidean: Perhaps

There are two distinct ways to approach seeking an answer to the question we began with above. One way would be to catalogue and defend evidence in support of or against a direct historical connection. The other is to produce an analysis of the important features of Descartes' view and compare these with Spinoza's own view on the same matter. I will proceed largely according to the latter, though it will be necessary to mention certain historical facts along the way. Since our focus is on method, let's begin with perhaps the clearest expression of Descartes' views on the matter.

Rule Four of the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*¹¹⁴ states "We need a method if we are to investigate the truth of things."¹¹⁵ Such a thought is not, of course, original to Descartes. The desire for a method of investigation of truth is, in my view,

113. This is an important difference from Hobbes.

114. References to Descartes will follow the standard practice. English translations are from Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*. In his preface to this work Dugald Murdoch notes that this text was written in 1628, but was not published until after Descartes' death. The first Dutch edition in 1684 and the first Latin edition not until 1701—both long after Spinoza's own death. (*ibid.*, 7) More interestingly, he notes that Leibniz purchased a copy of the original manuscript in 1670! Thus, Spinoza could very well have had exposure to this text. Since, as I have said, we are not investigating a direct historical connection between Descartes and Spinoza, this is not so important. It is enough to suppose that Descartes believed what he wrote here, wrote in a similar spirit elsewhere, and that Spinoza's own view of method can be contrasted with it.

115. AT X 371.

ur-philosophical. But Descartes' call for a method is a call for renewal (an *Umdenken*, as it were). Descartes defines 'a method' as "reliable rules which are easy to apply, and such that if one follows them exactly, one will never take what is false to be true or fruitlessly expend one's mental efforts, but will gradually and constantly increase one's knowledge till one arrives at a true understanding of everything within one's capacity."¹¹⁶ This is not so far removed from Aristotle, who, e.g. in *De Partibus Animalium* asserts that "in the science which inquires into nature, there must be certain canons, by reference to which a hearer shall be able to criticize the method of a professed exposition, quite independently of the question whether the statements made be true or false."¹¹⁷ This is only the beginning, of course. The next three rules set the parameters of the method.

Rule Five begins by stipulating that "[t]he whole method consists entirely in the ordering and arranging of the objects on which we must concentrate our mind's eye if we are to discover some truth."¹¹⁸ The manner of this 'ordering and arranging' is to "first reduce complicated and obscure propositions step by step to simple ones, and then, starting with the intuition of the simplest ones of all, try to ascend through the same steps to a knowledge of all the rest."¹¹⁹

In Rule Six, Descartes elucidates, "to distinguish the simplest things from those that are complicated and to set them out in an orderly manner, we should attend to what is most simple in each series of things in which we have directly deduced some truths from others, and should observe how all the rest are more, or less, or equally,

116. AT X 372.

117. 639a13-15. Translations of Aristotle are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation, One-Volume Digital Edition*.

118. AT X 379.

119. AT X 379.

removed from the simplest.”¹²⁰ Here we have what Descartes calls “the main secret of my method, and there is no more useful Rule in this whole treatise.”¹²¹ Descartes explicitly breaks from Aristotle, rejecting that such arrangements in series must be “referred to some ontological genus”, but rather in epistemic terms, “in so far as some things can be known on the basis of some others.”¹²²

Rule Seven concerns *complete* knowledge. The requirements for this are that “every single thing relating to our undertaking must be:

1. surveyed in a
 - (a) continuous and
 - (b) wholly uninterrupted sweep of thought, and
2. be included in a
 - (a) sufficient and
 - (b) well-ordered enumeration.”¹²³

Descartes makes clear that the first requirement is intended to make it so that “memory is left with practically no role to play, and I seem to intuit the whole thing at once.”¹²⁴ This strongly parallels Spinoza’s dismal view of memory, and may even suggest a way of understanding what Spinoza may have had in mind for his own concept of ‘intuition’.

In his explanation of “sufficient enumeration”, Descartes suggests that “when our knowledge of something is not reducible to simple intuition and we have cast off our syllogistic fetters, we are left with this one path, which we should stick to with

120. AT X 381.

121. AT X 381.

122. AT X 381.

123. AT X 387.

124. AT X 388.

complete confidence.”¹²⁵ It is worth noticing that this involves an explicit rejection of Aristotelian syllogism. Descartes further argues that “if we arrange all of the relevant items in the best order, so that for the most part they fall under definite classes, it will be sufficient if we look closely at one class... If we do that, we shall at any rate never pointlessly go over the same ground twice.”¹²⁶ Recall from our earlier discussion of Spinoza’s view of method in the *TdIE* that Spinoza adopts a very similar principle, namely, that one of the purposes of method is to avoid wearying the mind with useless things. This seems to have come straight from Descartes.

Descartes concludes “these last three Rules should not be separated, We should generally think of them together, since they all contribute equally to the perfection of the method.”¹²⁷ Thus, we have arrived at the core of Descartes’ methodology. The remaining rules concern the application of this method.

To summarize, Descartes’ method consists in:

1. Ordering and arranging the objects of investigation for the discovery of truth. (Rule 5)
2. Distinguishing the simplest things from those that are complicated. (Rule 6)
3. Continuous, wholly uninterrupted survey and sufficient and well-ordered enumeration. (Rule 7)

Compare this with Spinoza’s principles from the *TdIE* which consist in,

1. Prioritizing the whole over the parts as far as the rules governing understanding are concerned.
2. Distinguishing true from false perceptions.
3. Avoiding wearying the mind with useless things.

125. AT X 389.

126. AT X 391.

127. AT X 392.

On the face of it, these two lists are very similar (though the second item seems to differ quite significantly). Clearly, Spinoza agrees with Descartes that method requires careful prioritization, and they both think that method aims in part at directing the mind in a better and more useful way. Where they appear to differ, Descartes seems to have maintained an Aristotelian idiolect, whereas Spinoza adopts the more modern language of perception. Arguably, the two do not differ much even here, if true perceptions are the simplest things, and false perceptions are complicated. This is, in one sense, literally true, since for Spinoza true perceptions are at bottom ideas of singular things, whereas false perceptions always involve confusion of multiple ideas.

So, it seems the early Spinoza really does adopt a straightforwardly Cartesian method. Since I argued in the previous chapter that Spinoza's views on method do not change much, it might seem that Spinoza's method even in his mature work is therefore Cartesian. As is often the case with Spinoza, appearances can be deceiving.

2.5 Spinoza

In the first letter we have from Spinoza's correspondence with Henry Oldenburg of the Royal Society of London, Oldenburg asks Spinoza to tell him "what defects [does he] find in the Philosophy of Descartes and [in that] of Bacon, and how do you judge that they can be removed and replaced by sounder views."¹²⁸ Oldenburg's request is based on his having spoken with Spinoza in person about both the Cartesian and Baconian philosophies.¹²⁹ The question is interesting, since it presumes that already in 1661 Spinoza is operating to some degree outside Cartesian and Baconian orthodoxies.

Spinoza's response is guarded, but a helpful starting point. He provides a set of

128. *Ep. I*, IV/6/11-13.

129. Oldenburg tells us this in his letter.

three errors he takes to be common to both Descartes and Bacon:¹³⁰

1. “they have wandered so far from knowledge of the first cause and origin of things.”
2. “they did not know the true nature of the human Mind.”
3. “they never grasped the true cause of error.”

Spinoza argues that the first two errors can “be easily inferred from the truth of the three propositions mentioned above.”¹³¹ The precise nature of the inference from Spinoza’s three propositions about the nature of substances to how it is that Descartes and Bacon have failed both to have knowledge of the first cause and origin of things and to know the true nature of the human Mind is unclear. Perhaps what Spinoza has in mind is Descartes’ attempt to establish interaction between Mind and Body, which would seem to require less than total difference in essence. Presumably in the second case, he takes both Descartes and Bacon to be committed to created substances.

There is no need to determine whether Spinoza’s estimation of the two philosophers is wholly accurate. It is enough to note that these differences in substantive content need not imply substantive differences in method. Spinoza argues for the third error explicitly. The argument goes as follows:¹³²

1. “The will differs from this or that volition in the same way as whiteness differs from this or that white thing, or humanity differs from this or that man.”
2. “So it is as impossible to conceive that the will is the cause of this or that volition as to conceive that humanity is the cause of Peter and Paul.”

130. *Ep. II*, IV/8/21-23.

131. *Ep. II*, IV/8/26-28. The three propositions are given at IV/8/7-10: “[P1] That two substances cannot exist in nature unless they differ in their whole essence; [P2] That a substance cannot be produced, but that it is of its essence to exist; [P3] That every substance must be infinite, *or* supremely perfect in its kind.”

132. *Ep. II*, IV/9/10-23.

3. “The will, then, is only a being of reason and ought not in any way to be called a cause of this or that volition.”
4. “Particular volitions cannot be called free (because they require a cause in order to exist) but must be as their causes have determined them to be.”
5. “According to Descartes, the errors themselves are particular volitions.”
6. “It follows necessarily [from the preceding three premises] that the errors (i.e., particular volitions) are not free, but determined by external causes, and not at all by the will.”

So, essentially, the third error attributed to both Descartes and Bacon is that they blame the (free) will for error, and so haven’t understood its true, deterministic, nature.

In his mature work, Spinoza does not treat method as a thoroughly distinct topic of philosophical investigation, at least, in the same way that Zabarella, Hobbes, Descartes, and Bacon do. There are, nevertheless, a number of well-known passages in which the topic of philosophical method and its constituent parts are discussed. More intriguingly, perhaps the best discussion of method in relation to Spinoza and his predecessors comes in the form of Lodewijk Meyer’s introduction to Spinoza’s *PPC*. Meyer begins by asserting what is by now a common theme in our investigation, that

the best and surest Method of seeking and teaching the truth in the Sciences is that of the Mathematicians, who demonstrate their Conclusions from Definitions, Postulates, and Axioms. Indeed, this opinion is rightly held. For since a certain and firm knowledge of anything unknown can only be derived from things known certainly beforehand, these things must be laid down at the start, as a stable foundation on which to build the whole edifice of human knowledge;¹³³

Meyer seems convinced in roughly the same way Zabarella and Hobbes were, that this mathematical method is a model for all scientific knowledge, and, like Hobbes,

133. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 224–225.

seems poised to extend this method from the natural world to the civil, or moral realm. Meyer notes that other philosophers have failed to apply this method even to natural sciences other than mathematics, and argues that this has caused a great deal of confusion. He then declares “at last there appeared that brightest star of our age, René Descartes. By this new Method he first brought out of darkness and into the light, whatever in Mathematics had been inaccessible to the ancients, and whatever could be desired in addition to that by his own Contemporaries.”¹³⁴ Meyer here admits that Descartes’ method is not set down in a geometric *style*, i.e., the order exemplified by Euclid’s *Elements*. However, he opines that “many who have been led, either by a blind impulse, or by the authority of someone else, to enlist as followers of Descartes, have only impressed his opinions and doctrines on their memory; when the subject comes up, they know only how to chatter and babble, but not how to demonstrate anything, as was, and still is, the custom among those who are attached to Aristotle’s philosophy.”¹³⁵ For this reason, he has “often wished that someone who was skilled both in the Analytic and the Synthetic order... would be willing to take on this work, to render in the Synthetic order what Descartes wrote in the Analytic, and to demonstrate it in the manner familiar to the geometricians.”¹³⁶ That someone, of course, is Spinoza.

So, we have a nice contemporary second-hand account of some of the reasoning behind at least one instance of Spinoza’s employing the geometrical *order* for a text which is described as fitting the *geometrical*, i.e., mathematical, method, but was composed according to Descartes’ analytic method. Perhaps Spinoza agrees with Meyer that the *synthetic* geometrical order is pedagogically useful. What is less clear

134. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 226.

135. *Ibid.*, 227.

136. *Ibid.*

is whether content composed according to a geometrical *method* which is taught via the geometrical order is composed as such for pedagogical or logical reasons. Nor is it clear that Meyer's preference for the Aristotelian exposition is shared by Spinoza.

As I note in the introduction above, commentators have suggested many explanations for Spinoza's use of the geometrical order. One of the clearest characterizations of the spectrum of views to be found regarding Spinoza's method is found in Edwin Curley's introduction to his translation of the *Ethics* according to which,

Sometimes, for example, it is suggested that Spinoza's philosophy *required* axiomatic exposition, that conceiving the world as he did, as a tightly knit deterministic system, he could not properly have expressed this conception in any other way; or that conceiving knowledge as he did, he would have regarded deduction from self-evident premises as the only suitably scientific way of presenting his philosophy. At the opposite extreme, it is sometimes held that the axiomatic exposition is merely a literary device designed to conceal the author's personality, to capitalize on the prestige of geometry, or even to avoid the temptation to quote Scripture—but having no further significance. The truth, I suggest, is that Spinoza's choice of the axiomatic method represents nothing more, and nothing less, than an awesome commitment to intellectual honesty and clarity.¹³⁷

There is some evidence to suggest that Spinoza certainly was committed to presenting things as clearly as he could manage, but if it were the case that the geometrical order of his *PPC* and *Ethics* were required in order for Spinoza to present things honestly and clearly, then we would have to contend with the fact that the *Theological Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise*, both begun after the *Ethics*, were written in prose.

Herman De Dijn begins his treatment of Spinoza's conceptions of philosophical method with the following remarks:

137. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 402.

Even today, there is fundamental disagreement among interpreters concerning practically every aspect of this method. Spinoza's own explicit thoughts about philosophical method are almost exclusively to be found in a short, unfinished work, the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, in which Spinoza does not seem to talk about a geometrical method at all.¹³⁸

De Dijn's remarks are interesting, because they suggest that Spinoza might have had a conception of *method* independent of the geometrical *order* and method in which he renders both his *PPC* and his masterwork, the *Ethics*. It is well known to scholars that Spinoza experimented with others ways of rendering his thoughts, including, perhaps surprisingly, a dialogue.¹³⁹ The debate, however, concerns what to make of the *geometrical* method, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that Spinoza does not talk about it in the *TdIE*.

Outside of his two geometrical texts, Spinoza raises the question of method in a political context with the following argument from the *TTP* (the purpose of which is ultimately to clarify the purpose of Scripture):

But because deducing a thing solely from intellectual notions very often requires a long chain of perceptions, plus extreme caution, mental perceptiveness, and restraint—all of which are rarely found in men—men would rather be taught by experience than deduce all their perceptions from a few axioms and connect them together.

It follows that if someone wants to teach a doctrine to a whole nation—not to mention the whole human race—and wants everyone to understand him in every respect, he is bound to prove his doctrine solely by experience, and for the most part to accommodate his arguments and the definitions of his teaching to the power of understanding of ordinary people, who form the greatest part of the human race. He should not connect his arguments, or give definitions, according as they serve to connect his arguments better. Otherwise he will write only for the learned...¹⁴⁰

138. Dijn, "Conceptions of Philosophical Method in Spinoza: Logica and Mos Geometricus," 55.

139. I.e., the two dialogues in the *Short Treatise*.

140. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 148.

In a supplementary note, Spinoza provides yet another clue to one function of the geometrical method, when he argues in a Cartesian manner that “for us to be able to conceive God’s nature clearly and distinctly, we must attend to certain very simple notions called common notions, and connect with them those pertaining to the divine nature.”¹⁴¹ This insistence on beginning from *common*, simple principles and building from them to the existence and nature of a thing bears a striking similarity to the views of both Zabarella and Hobbes. Yet unlike Zabarella and Hobbes it is evident from the diversity of topics covered in the *Ethics* that Spinoza is committed to applying his methodical way of thinking to *every* part of reality that humans are able to access. Aaron Garrett makes this point quite clearly:

Spinoza appears to emphasize a kind of synthesis similar to that discussed by Hobbes and Zabarella. We take a group of definitions of real things, and in tandem with axioms we interrelate them into compositive structures via a method arising from an inborn power in our minds. The interrelation of definitions and axioms provides reasons, and thus exhibits and imparts causal necessity to the effect. Such necessity is, for Spinoza (and Zabarella), both internal to the proofs of the proposition, and derivative of the first principles from which they arise. For Hobbes, the necessity of any given proposition is primarily hypothetical, as arising from first principles. All have different theories of cause, but all view causes qua method as reasons of some sort. And, insofar as a deductive method provides necessary causes, it also provides reason.¹⁴²

Spinoza rarely mentions method in the *Ethics*, but the few places where it does show up are instructive. In the first scholium of 2P40, Spinoza notes “some axioms, or notions, result from other causes which it would be helpful to explain by this method of ours.”¹⁴³ From this, we might surmise that Spinoza takes the method of the *Ethics* to be explanatory, that is, a means of explanation rather than a means of scientific

141. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 156 n. 7.

142. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza’s Method*, 109.

143. 2P40s1.

discovery. Yet, Spinoza also seems to use “method” in precisely that scientific sense.

For example, in the *TTP*,

I say that the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ at all from the method of interpreting nature, but agrees with it completely. For the method of interpreting nature consists above all in putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things. In the same way, to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture and to infer from it the mind of the authors of Scripture, by legitimate inferences, as from certain data and principles.¹⁴⁴

There are at least a few instances of Spinoza referring to the *geometrical order*, as opposed to *geometrical method*. In one of the more amusing passages in the *Ethics*, Spinoza suggests “before I begin to demonstrate these things in our cumbersome Geometric order, I should like first to show briefly here the dictates of reason themselves, so that everyone may more easily perceive what I think.”¹⁴⁵ It is not important that Spinoza himself finds his own use of the geometrical order cumbersome, but it is instructive that he suggests that stepping *outside* of that order may allow his readers to more easily perceive what he thinks.¹⁴⁶

Thus, the geometrical order as Spinoza uses it appears to directly contradict Zabarella’s *differentiae* for order, as opposed to method. That is, according to Zabarella’s distinction, the function of order is to teach what is known better or *more easily*. If Spinoza thinks that the geometrical order is not the way to teach what he wants to teach more easily, then perhaps he thinks it is in some way better, or else, the purpose of the geometrical order for Spinoza is not to be employed as an order in the same sense as Zabarella, but rather as something else about which we could only speculate. Perhaps the purpose of the geometrical order is still to teach Spinoza’s

144. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 171.

145. 4P18s.

146. Perhaps this is a concession to Descartes?

views, but not for everyone. The following remark in *Ep. II* to Henry Oldenburg supports this interpretation:

Once I have demonstrated these things, then (provided you attend to the definition of God), you will easily be able to see what I am aiming at, so it is not necessary to speak more openly about these matters. But I can think of no better way of demonstrating these things clearly and briefly than to prove them in the Geometric manner [more Geometrico] and subject them to your understanding.¹⁴⁷

Oldenburg responds to this with (perhaps feigned) humility, admitting “I approve very much of your geometric style of proof, but at the same time I blame my own obtuseness that I do not follow so easily the things you teach so exactly.”¹⁴⁸ So, even if Spinoza intends the geometrical order to be a means of better or more easily explaining his views, not to everyone, but perhaps to other philosophers, in practice it appears to fail to achieve this aim.

Spinoza does, however, seem to hold the geometric style of proof in high regard. In *Ep. LVI* to Hugo Boxel, he criticizes those who deny the utility of the style, “Next, from the fact that the divine and human sciences are full of disputes and controversies, we can’t conclude that everything treated in them is uncertain. There are a great many people who are such lovers of contradiction that they have mocked geometrical demonstrations themselves.”¹⁴⁹ So, Spinoza seems to associate geometrical proof with certainty.

147. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 166.

148. *Ibid.*, 168.

149. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 422.

2.6 Conclusion

The geometric style serves Spinoza's project of demonstrating by certain reasoning his iconoclastic views, which nevertheless, if the principles are true, and the demonstrations sound, must be true. The corresponding method is, ultimately, to be found in the unity of nature, its order, and its laws. It does not follow from this that Spinoza thinks that the order of Nature *per se*, is the order in which he arranges the *Ethics*. Spinoza's own admission that proposition seven of *Ethics I* "would be an axiom to everyone," if only they "would attend to the nature of substance,"¹⁵⁰ suggests that the geometric order is not the order of Nature in itself, but simply the ordering of Spinoza's thinking as he sees fit to present it.

Nevertheless, Spinoza's particular use of the geometrical *method*, which is bound up in his preference for the geometrical *order* or style, rests on the unity of the order of nature and the order of thinking. In fact, this principle is expressed plainly in perhaps the most infamous proposition of the *Ethics*, 2p7: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." In this notorious expression of the parallelism of Thought and Extension, mind and body, Spinoza embeds the foundations of the most iconoclastic of his views—including the absolute necessity of the causal order, the unity of Nature, the denial of free will and the systematic treatment of the emotions, as well as the denial of robust moral responsibility.

Spinoza's method thus involves a commitment to the view that one's mind follows the same order as one's body, and the rest of the universe is ordered in the same way, and so the method of understanding the universe is the same as the method of understanding oneself.

150. 1P8s.

Chapter 3

‘Ideas, Images, and Words’: Spinoza on Language, Use, and Meaning

For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.¹

—*Ludwig Wittgenstein*

3.1 Introduction

Suppose, in some dusty tome, you stumble across the following cryptic remark: “He who has a Body capable of a great many things has a Mind whose greatest part is eternal.”² On the face of it, such a claim seems absurd. But why? The obvious answer is that either we take it to mean something which is, or implies something, *prima facie* contradictory, or we do not know what it means. Suppose, further, that we endorse the principle of charity, and as such we endeavour not to immediately write off as absurd any proposition the meaning of which is obscure. How shall we endeavour to

1. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition*, §43.

2. 5P39.

produce a satisfactory account of the meaning of such claims? We must begin with an account of meaning. For that, we need a theory of language.

The opening remark above is one of the final elements of Spinoza's *Ethics*. To know what it means, we must produce an account of *Spinoza's* meaning. That is, we need to know how to know what Spinoza meant. For this, as I have said, we need a theory of *Spinoza's* language. The philosophy of language is an area of Spinoza scholarship that has been understudied and overlooked.³ On the one hand, this is not very surprising, since Spinoza wrote no treatises purporting to deal directly with the subject.⁴ Yet, Spinoza's major works contain some sparse but insightful discussions of language, and the meaning of words.⁵ A careful analysis of these discussions is not only necessary for a complete picture of Spinoza's philosophy, but can, I shall argue, help us to solve an important issue for the interpretation of many of Spinoza's most important claims. Spinoza's *Ethics*, despite its geometrical form, contains numerous elements for which there are no clear (further) explicit uses in the demonstrations of the text.⁶

Two major commentators have expressed some version of a thesis which I intend to take seriously, in a direction which has, until now, remained largely unexplored. First, referring to Spinoza's causal axiom (1A4), Margaret Wilson claims that "there is not much point in trying either to explain or to justify the axiom in an off-the-cuff manner,

3. One notable exception is Lærke, "Spinoza's Language." The most important earlier works are Savan, "Spinoza and Language" and the response in Parkinson, "Language and knowledge in Spinoza."

4. Except, perhaps, the Hebrew Grammar, which is clearly not intended to be a work of philosophy.

5. Outside of philosophy, Spinoza is cited as a proponent of the view that "[t]he use of language not only plays a role in the perception of others' emotions, it also plays a fundamental role in the perceptions of one's own emotions." (Holtgraves and Kashima, "Language, Meaning, and Social Cognition," 77)

6. Most notably, 1A2, but also four definitions, two other axioms, two lemmas, and two postulates, among others.

without considering in detail what Spinoza does with it.”⁷ Additionally, Edwin Curley has expressed at length a similar sentiment, in the preface to the glossary-index of his *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*. More critically, as Curley himself quotes,⁸ Spinoza endorses a version of this view for his own purposes.

Spinoza’s own view of meaning is not a mere shibboleth, but, on the contrary, should be applied to the interpretation of his meaning across his philosophical corpus, and this implies that where the use of some term, element, phrase, or point of doctrine, is unclear, the meaning is thus also unclear, but may be uncovered. Conversely, where use is clear, meaning is, if not utterly transparent, readily discernible. This view of meaning is amplified in the *Ethics* because there the meaning of terms sometimes radically diverges from ordinary usage, and the truncated form of explanation afforded by the Euclidean structure leaves little room for contextual inferences. Where such inferences are possible, it can be difficult to follow the demonstrations sufficiently to determine context. Worse, as I demonstrate in Chapter 4, there are considerable cases in which the structure actively hinders discerning the context, or removes it entirely.

3.2 Meaning

Let’s begin with Spinoza’s most important remarks on meaning.

One of his more striking claims about language occurs in the *TTP*, in which he asserts, “words have a definite meaning only from their use.”⁹

Reformulated, this could be expressed as,

Meaning Requires Use. Some word, w , has a meaning, m , if and only if it has at

7. Wilson, *Ideas and Mechanism*, 160.

8. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 607.

9. *Ibid.*, 250.

least one use, *u*.

Let us call this the *MRU* ('Meaning Requires Use') principle. Use (of a word) is both necessary and sufficient for meaning. Where there is use, there is meaning. This provides a rendering of Spinoza's definition of 'meaning' in an axiomatic form.¹⁰

The similarity of *MRU* to at least one interpretation of Wittgenstein's view of meaning should be obvious.¹¹ The immediate implication of *MRU* is to naturalize (i.e., demystify) 'holy' or 'sacred' books—it is, for Spinoza, no longer acceptable to appeal to the obscurity or ineffability of some domain in order to justify some interpretation of scripture.

By beginning the argument with such a strong principle about the meaning of words in general, *MRU* appears to function as an axiom, which should readily apply also to the rest of Spinoza's work, and to interpretations of other texts, more generally. If Spinoza is, as a matter of fact, methodologically committed to the fixing of meaning by means of use, then, I argue, we should attempt to derive the meaning of Spinoza's own words (especially contentious ones) in other works *only from their use*. It may be that there are reasons not to accept Spinoza's principle, but here it is simply a matter of methodological consistency and the introduction of a reasonable hypothesis. Investigation of this hypothesis may shed light on Spinoza's views whether or not the principle is ultimately correct.

In what follows I shall demonstrate that Spinoza is committed to the broadest

10. Eric Schliesser endorses this interpretation of Spinoza's use of the geometrical method in a brief footnote, stating, "the geometrical method is not what it seems to be—the meaning of terms only becomes clear by their use subsequently." (Schliesser, "Spinoza on the Politics of Philosophical Understanding," 502) I argue that this is a specific case of a more general principle for Spinoza.

11. See, e.g., the epigraph of this chapter, §43 of Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition*, "For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language."

application of a strong version of the *MRU* principle.

The relationship between Spinoza's endorsement of *MRU* and contemporary discussions involves some difficulties given the linguistic and cultural changes that have elapsed between them. There are, however, some useful points of contact that we can use to gain a sense of what Spinoza is doing.

Mogens Lærke points out that at least part of Pierre Poiret's pointed attack on Spinoza involves an appeal to ordinary language.¹² Here we run into what is potentially a very serious problem: how to determine *use*. Ordinary language use occupies a much larger realm than do the texts of a dead philosopher. Ordinarily, we can simply look and see how other members of our linguistic community speak and write, and derive meaning from experience in an organic manner. As with scripture, the works of dead philosophers must be understood not (at least entirely) organically, as it were, but synthetically. We must employ a well-defined methodological practice which can distinguish, with sufficient success, meaningful from meaningless statements, and true from false interpretations of meaningful statements. Poiret's focus on Spinoza's use of language turns out to provide a helpful *prima facie* account of two different, but interrelated, ways that Spinoza's use (or misuse) of traditional terminology (often in unorthodox ways) can function. Julie Cooper suggests that both Poiret and François Lamy deride Spinoza's language for its subversive and atheistic perversion.¹³

On this reading, “[a]lthough Spinoza employs a traditional moral idiom, speaking incessantly about virtue, love of God, and salvation, he perverts these terms’ meaning.”¹⁴ Yet, as Poiret notices, Spinoza does not stick to the traditional script. Sometimes, as in the case of Humility (*humilitas*) and its demotion from the list of

12. Lærke, “Spinoza’s Language,” 520.

13. Cooper, *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought*, 73–77.

14. *Ibid.*, 73.

virtues, Spinoza openly rejects received meaning. Cooper points out that Poiret fits this into his narrative by suggesting that this is merely an indication that Spinoza's candor "provides an index of societal corruption."¹⁵ Thus, on this critical reading, Spinoza's aim is either to surreptitiously corrupt the moral order, or to endorse already existing corruption. In at least the former case, part of Spinoza's perceived error is not only moral, but semantic. In contemporary analytic philosophical circles, Spinoza might be sometimes described as violating Gricean maxims.¹⁶ Consequently, the arguments of this chapter are not intended as a defense of the *MRU* principle in general, but only of the applicability of this principle to interpretation of Spinoza.

In a proto-Gricean moment, Spinoza makes prescient use of the distinction between what-is-said and what-is-meant, noting that he is,

... speaking of true doubt in the mind, and not of what we commonly see happen, when someone says in words that he doubts, although his mind does not doubt. For it is not the business of the Method to emend that. That belongs rather to the investigation of stubbornness, and its emendation.¹⁷

Here, again, Spinoza distinguishes the way in which an ordinary language user may use a word (to assert some state of affairs), and that thing's actually being the case, i.e., that the assertion is, really, true. In this case, the attribution of the person's use of the word (i.e., their meaning) to stubbornness seems to be derived from the incongruity between what is said and either what is really the case and/or what is intended. These distinctions are easily conflated.

The remarks of early critical commentators on Spinoza's use of language in his mature work seem to have been presaged by the young Spinoza when, for example in

15. Cooper, *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought*, 77.

16. See, e.g., Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, 5.

17. (I/29/22-25) Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 34.

the *CM*, he explains that,

To perceive these two, the *true* and the *false* rightly, we shall begin with the meaning of the words, from which it will be plain that these are only extrinsic denominations of things and are not attributed to things except metaphorically. But since ordinary people first invent words, which afterwards are used by the Philosophers, it seems desirable for one seeking the original meaning of a term to ask what it first denoted among ordinary people—particularly where we lack other causes that could be used to investigate that [meaning], causes drawn from the nature of language.¹⁸

Before setting out this plan of action, Spinoza argues that there is a sense in which “God can be called one” and “unique.” Yet, he appears to contradict himself by immediately following this argument with the claim that “more accurately . . . God is only very improperly called one and unique.” So, what explains this discrepancy? Spinoza says only that “this does not matter greatly, or even at all, to those who care about things and not about words.”¹⁹ Later, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza affirms the antecedent, declaring,

I know that in their common usage these words mean something else. But my purpose is to explain the nature of things, not the meaning of words. I intend to indicate these things by words whose usual meaning is not entirely opposed to the meaning with which I wish to use them. One warning of this should suffice.²⁰

It might seem from such statements that Spinoza has no use for philosophy of language, or semantics, in its current sense. His concern, as he repeats, is to explain *the nature of things*. Thus, he endorses a distinction between meaning and what things are really like. Compare this to Gareth Evans’ suggestion:

18. (I/246/15-20) Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 312.

19. (I/246/10-14) *ibid.*

20. 3DAXX Exp. (II/195).

What makes it one rather than another of a pair of identical twins that you are in love with? Certainly not some specification blue printed in your mind; it may be no more than this: it was one of them and not the other that you have met. The theorist may gesture to the description ‘the one I have met’ but can give no explanation for the impossibility of its being outweighed by other descriptions which may have been acquired as a result of error and which may in fact happen to fit the other, unmet, twin. If God had looked into your mind, he would not have seen there with whom you were in love, and of whom you were thinking.”²¹

The point is, simply, not to mistake *Spinoza’s* meaning, i.e., his understanding of the nature of some thing, with *ordinary* meaning, i.e., common usage, or with the words themselves.²²

3.3 Word Problems

Despite this apparent dismissal of issues concerning the meaning of words, Spinoza also discusses verbal disputes, and problems of words in general, in a number of places. For instance, remarking on an axiom attributed to Descartes, we find the following claim:

Suppose someone sees two books—one the work of a distinguished philosopher, the other that of some trifle, but both written in the same hand. If he attends [not] to the meaning of the words (that is, does not attend to them insofar as they are like images), but only to the handwriting and to the order of the letters, he will recognize no inequality between them which compels him to look for different causes. They will seem to him to have proceeded from the same cause in the same way. But if he attends to the meaning of the words and the

21. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 292.

22. Nor, indeed, should these be confused with the objects to which we refer.

discourses, he will find a great inequality between them.²³

Later, Spinoza employs the notion of a merely verbal distinction to claim that “though the thing and its striving to preserve its being are distinguished by reason, or rather verbally (which deceives these people very greatly), they are not in any way really distinct.”²⁴ So, Spinoza rejects necessary identity between verbal / rational distinctions and the things these distinctions purport to reference. This fits with an account of meaning as use, where use is a feature of language users, not of the things language is used to symbolize.

In a letter to G.H. Schuller, Spinoza responds to Schuller’s query about terminological disputes as follows:

I don’t know what your friend means before he appeals to experience and asks for careful attention. Then he adds: if one of two men affirms something concerning some matter, but the other denies it, etc., [and they speak in such a way that they are each aware of this, although they seem to be contrary to one another verbally, nevertheless if their concepts are weighed, they both speak the truth (each one according to his concept)]. This is true, if he understands that the two men, though they use the same words, are nevertheless thinking about different things.²⁵

Spinoza is, thus, committed to the view that this kind of error, of speaking past one another, is not really, in itself, an error. Rather, the culprit is the equivocal nature of the disputed words, which are not, themselves, constitutive of the ideas or meanings

23. I/156/27 – I/157/2 Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 245. Curley’s translation misses the ‘nec’, so I have added ‘not’ in brackets. Gebhardt: “*Nempe, si quis libros aliquos (putà unum alicujus insignis Philosophi, alterum alicujus nugatoris) unâ eâdemque manu scriptos videt, nec ad sensum verborum (hoc est, quatenus veluti imagines sunt), sed tantùm ad delineamenta characterum, & ordinem literarum attendit: nullam inaequalitatem, quae ipsum cogat, diversas causas quaerere, inter ipsos agnoscet; sed ipsi ab eâdem causâ eo—demque modo processisse videbuntur. Verùm si ad sensum verborum, & orationum attendat, magnam inter ipsos inaequalitatem reperiet*” (Gebhardt, *Spinoza*)

24. I/248 Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 314.

25. IV/265 *ibid.*, *Ep. LVIII*.

expressed.

In another similar case, Spinoza explains that one of three reasons those who ascribe duration to God err arises “because we are accustomed, on account of a defect of words, to ascribe eternity also to things whose essence is distinguished from their existence. . . .”²⁶ Here, Spinoza offers an anthropological account of a certain kind of error, which rests on what he calls a ‘defect of words’. He explains that this error results “in their not understanding what eternity is, but rather considering it as if it were a species of duration.”²⁷ In this case it seems that the defect is not, strictly, in the words, but rather in the fact that some use the word ‘eternity’ to pick out both what Spinoza means by it, and a species of duration. That is, the defect is not in the utterance, or the letters, but in the use of the same word to refer to two different (or even opposite) things, without being clear about this difference.

More strongly, the young Spinoza asserts the following, regarding the status of words,

[S]ince words are part of the imagination, i.e., since we feign many concepts, in accordance with the random composition of words in the memory from some disposition of the body, it is not to be doubted that words, as much as the imagination, can be the cause of many and great errors, unless we are very wary of them. Moreover, they are established according to the pleasure and power of understanding of ordinary people, so that they are only signs of things as they are in the imagination, but not as they are in the intellect. This is clear from the fact that the names given to things that are only intellect, and not in the imagination, are often negative (for example, infinite, incorporeal, etc.), and also from the fact that they express negatively many things that are really affirmative, and conversely (for example, uncreated, independent, infinite, immortal). Because the contraries of these are much more easily imagined, they occurred first to the earliest men, and they used positive names. We affirm and deny many things because the nature of words—not the nature of things—allows us to affirm them. And in our ignorance of this, we easily take something false

26. (I/251) Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 317.

27. (I/251/23) *ibid.*

to be true.²⁸

Already at this early stage, Spinoza issues a distinction between what he here calls ‘the nature of words’, as opposed to ‘the nature of things’. Since words are part of the imagination²⁹, insofar as we mistake them for actually existing things, they are not adequate ideas, but necessarily confused ones.³⁰ In which part of the imagination are words? The memory [of some disposition of the body]. Thus, words cannot tell us, of themselves, about the nature of [the] things [they purport to be about], because words operate on the level of affirmations and denials brought about by the recollection of some past affection of our body (which affection, to be fair, was in part brought about by some external thing which may be the ultimate target of our knowledge and our words).³¹

3.3.1 Definitions

Regarding the status of definitions with respect to linguistic limitations, Spinoza notes that every definition must be affirmative, clarifying, “I mean intellectual affirmation—it matters little whether the definition is verbally affirmative; because of the poverty of language it will sometimes, perhaps, [only] be able to be expressed negatively, although it is understood affirmatively.”³² This argument rests on the previous claims about

28. (paras. 88-89, II/33) Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 38.

29. Spinoza defines the imagination in 2p17s in the following way: “the affections of the human Body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call the images of things, even if they do not reproduce the figures of things. And when the mind regards bodies this way, we shall say that it imagines.”

30. Spinoza is clear that, strictly speaking, the ideas which constitute the imagination are not *per se* false, but the mind errs “only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea that excludes the existence of those things that it imagines to be present to it.” (2p17s)

31. One can see the glimmers of a theory of perception in this argument, but it is primarily about epistemic error.

32. (par. 96, II/35/25) Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 40.

how words are formed, since if we are attempting to express with words what we understand intellectually, we must employ words whose origins are not intellectual, but imaginative. This is why, he claims, so many words which we use to refer to concepts of the intellect appear negative, but are actually affirmations.³³ Thus, Spinoza distinguishes between verbal affirmation and negation and intellectual affirmation and negation.

3.4 Imagination

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza takes his earlier association of words and language with the imagination, and codifies it, as a part of the first kind of knowledge according to which “from signs, e.g., from the fact that having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things.”³⁴

Later, this denigration of memory, imagination, and verbal recall becomes an admonishment

to distinguish accurately between an idea, *or* concept, of the Mind, and the images of things that we imagine. And then it is necessary to distinguish between ideas and the words by which we signify things. For because many people either completely confuse these three—ideas, images, and words—or do not distinguish them accurately enough, or carefully enough, they have been completely ignorant of this doctrine concerning the will. But it is quite necessary to know it, both for the sake of speculation and in order to arrange one’s life wisely.³⁵

Thus, Spinoza associates the failure to know the doctrine of 2P49 with confusions of language.

33. Such as, e.g., ‘incorporeal’, ‘indestructible’, ‘infinite’.

34. 2P40 schol. 2, I; II/122/6-9.

35. 2P49 schol. [II]; II/131/30 – II/132/5.

One plausible target of Spinoza's attack on imagination and its association with words is Hobbes. For evidence of this, consider Hobbes' account of understanding in *Leviathan*, in which he distinguishes 'common understanding' from 'human understanding'.

Common understanding for Hobbes is "the Imagination that is rayed in man (or any other creature indued with the faculty of imagining) by words, or other voluntary signes, is that we generally call Understanding, and is common to Man and Beast."³⁶ Whereas, "that Understanding which is peculiar to man is the Understanding not onely his will; but his conceptions and thoughts, by the sequell and contexture of the names of things into Affirmations, Negations, and other formes of Speech."³⁷ Spinoza explicitly rejects the connection of understanding and imagination in any sense, arguing that "each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body. Hence it is not surprising that so many controversies have arisen among philosophers, who have wished to explain natural things by mere images of things."³⁸ This is what Spinoza calls 'the first kind of knowledge'. He goes on to assert both that this is "the only cause of falsity"³⁹ and that this lowest form of knowledge cannot teach us "to distinguish the true from the false."⁴⁰

As we saw above, Hobbes does distinguish two kinds of understanding, only one of which is 'peculiar to man', and so perhaps this latter form would satisfy Spinoza's criteria for true understanding. If we take Hobbes' appeal to "sequell and contexture", affirmation and negation, to mean something close to what Spinoza means by 'reason', the second kind of knowledge, according to which "we have common notions and

36. Hobbes, *Hobbes: Leviathan: Revised student edition*, 19.

37. *Ibid.*

38. 2p40s1. II/121/32-35.

39. 2p41.

40. 2p42.

adequate ideas of the properties of things,”⁴¹ then Hobbes’ account evades Spinoza’s criticism here, to some degree. It is difficult, however, to justify this reading, since Spinoza shifts to talk about *things*, while Hobbes remains thoroughly entranced by language, or, as he puts it ‘formes of Speech’. Thus, even if Hobbes is not the intended target here, Spinoza could not help but find Hobbes’ account of understanding to be one impoverished by its failure to account for the distinction between words and things.

What is really going on here is that Spinoza is committed to a sort of causal theory of knowledge. Not, that is, a causal theory in the current sense, in which the cause mediates between a belief and its truth, but rather a theory which arises out of Spinoza’s causal metaphysics—i.e., his monism. In order to see how this works, let’s start with 1A4: “Knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of its cause.” In order to understand this claim, we can look at how Spinoza uses it. In particular, the application of 1A4 in 2P45 suggests that there is a tight connection between the Substance-mode relation, the cause-effect relation, and the way in which we can know anything at all. 2P45 states “Each idea of each body, or of each singular thing which actually exists, necessarily involves an eternal and infinite essence of God.”

Now, bear in mind that ideas are the only sources of knowledge. Ideas of bodies (i.e., modes of Thought) ‘involve’ (*involvit*) God, or Substance. So, knowledge of bodies (i.e., true ideas of bodies) *involves* knowledge of God, or Substance, in some way. Here we are talking only about true ideas, i.e., ideas of things as they actually are, not ideas of things as we imagine them to be. But this is how we can generate a tripartite theory of knowledge from this monistic metaphysics of two attributes. Suppose we begin with a universe populated with, say, twenty simple bodies, setting

41. 2p40s2.

aside issues of the infinite for now. These twenty bodies will have twenty corresponding ideas, each of which involves an eternal and infinite essence of God, or, as Spinoza puts it in the demonstration, they involve the concept of their attribute. Such ideas cannot be false, since they are just direct manifestations of the very same power by which the bodies of which they are ideas exist. Taken as a whole, these ideas would constitute what Spinoza calls ‘the infinite intellect’. Now, suppose these twenty bodies combine into five aggregate bodies with different numbers of parts (6, 5, 4, 3, and 2 would work). The outer shells of these new bodies may interact with one another, and these interactions may be represented by the aggregate bodies. Such representations necessarily involve both the nature of the external body and the nature of the body doing the representing. It is here that falsehood may arise, in the complex interplay between the now slightly different natures of these different bodies.

If a body composed of six simple parts is affected by a body composed of three simple parts, the former may represent that some effect on its more complex body is actually a property of the other body. If so, then it will be mistaken. This example is oversimplified, but perhaps using more familiar names may help. Imagine we are in Flatland.⁴² A Hexagon (a complex two-dimensional body made up of six triangular segments) may on a given day be assailed by a Triangle. This Triangle is in a hurry, and accidentally bumps into the Hexagon in the street, side-first. The Hexagon feels a sudden pinching sensation originating in the vicinity of one of its back sides, but does not see the Triangle. The Hexagon, experiencing a certain amount of physical discomfort and damage, imagines that the Triangle acted maliciously, deliberately driving its point into the Hexagon, and therefore feels anger toward it, as if it had freely chosen to cause the Hexagon’s pain. This attribution is false. The Triangle is,

42. See: Abbott, *Flatland : a romance of many dimensions*.

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in reality, a pacifist. Yet the Hexagon's damaged body represents its properties, along with some representation of the external body, conflating these into a single cause.

Now imagine that the Hexagon applies a name to this representation, so that it can remember what happened: 'Geometric assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm.' This name may be used more or less accurately depending on what is being conveyed, how it is felt, and whether or not it is understood. However, this is not the whole story.

In reality, there are no errors. The ideas of these bodies are all true when their true causes are taken into account, since these are the bodies that the ideas actually represent. The Triangle's activity really did affect the Hexagon. The Hexagon really did feel pain. And the Hexagon really did imagine the Triangle in its experience of that pain. Yet the Hexagon was confused, despite the contents of all the individual perceptions being accurate in themselves.

What this story shows is that Spinoza's metaphysics, epistemology, and his theory of language are intimately connected. The meaning of words, on this view, depends on and involves their causes.

3.5 Interpretation and Things as they Really Are

We began this discussion by recognizing Spinoza's commitment to a principle, *MRU*, according to which meaning is use. Furthermore, we have now seen that Spinoza differentiates himself from other philosophers by adding a further distinction between not merely the way in which words are used, and the meanings which we thereby may, rightly or wrongly, associate with them, but also between these and *things*. Spinoza is focused largely on getting clear about the latter, but in order to do so, he needs to be

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very clear about the way in which language leads us astray.

Why is Spinoza so focused on getting clear about the nature of *things*? One piece of evidence is found in a phrase Spinoza repeats a number of times. In a letter to Hugo Boxel, he opines that people “commonly have [the desire] to tell things, not as they are, but as they want them to be.”⁴³ This phrase occurs again at the outset of his final work, the unfinished *Political Treatise*, in which he criticizes not only common people, but philosophers, who “conceive men not as they are, but as they want them to be.”⁴⁴ This error seems to be at the heart of much of Spinoza’s theological, political, and ethical thinking. As such, let us briefly turn to Spinoza’s account of the interpretation of obscure texts and scripture, since it suggests a possible method for remedying this faulty conception.

In a different domain, but remaining committed to the view that words are the source of confusion, Spinoza distinguishes philosophical from theological ways of speaking, according to which,

While we are speaking philosophically we must not use theological ways of speaking. For because theology has usually—and that not without reason—represented God as a perfect man, it is appropriate in theology to say that God desires something, that he finds sorrow in the acts of the godless and takes pleasure in those of the pious. But in philosophy we understand clearly that to ascribe to God those ‘attributes’ which make a man perfect is as bad as if one wanted to ascribe to man those which make an elephant or an ass perfect. So there words of this kind have no place, and we cannot use them without confusing our concepts very much.⁴⁵

Spinoza holds the status of being if not the first, then one of the first, progenitors of secular biblical interpretation/criticism. He offers the following recommendation, which contains an echo of the *MRU* principle:

43. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 409.

44. *Ibid.*, 503.

45. (IV/148) Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 388.

Therefore, the universal rule in interpreting Scripture is to attribute nothing to Scripture as its teaching which we have not understood as clearly as possible from its history. What sort of history must that be? What must it chiefly relate? These are the questions we must now answer.

First, it must contain the nature and properties of the language in which the books of Scripture were written, and which their authors were accustomed to speak. For in this way we shall be able to find out all the meanings each utterance can admit in ordinary conversational usage.⁴⁶

Notice that in the theological domain, Spinoza is concerned with a very specific kind of language use, namely, the customary manner of speaking of the authors. This produces a set of reasonable constraints on interpretation. Despite the narrowness of the original application of these constraints to scripture, Spinoza appears to take them to apply more generally. In the following passage Spinoza considers how to interpret three different kinds of text, from three different authors. He recalls:

I know I once read in a book that a man named Orlando the furious used to ride a winged monster in the air, that he flew over whatever regions he wanted to, and that by himself he slaughtered an immense number of men and giants. The book contained other fantasies of this kind, which are completely incomprehensible from the standpoint of the intellect. I'd also read a similar story in Ovid, about Perseus, and finally, another, in the books of Judges and Kings, about Samson, who, alone and unarmed, slaughtered thousands of men, and about Elijah, who flew through the air, and at last went up into heaven in a chariot of fire, with horses of fire. These stories, I say, are completely similar. Nevertheless, we make a very different judgment about each of them: that the first wanted to write only trifles, the second, political matters, and the third, finally, sacred matters. And we persuade ourselves of this only because of the opinions we have of these writers.

So it is clear that for writings which are obscure or incomprehensible to the intellect, we must have some knowledge of the authors if we want to interpret their writings.⁴⁷

Spinoza strikingly, and uncharacteristically, reveals something of himself to the reader, while asserting that this is precisely what we need for the interpretation of 'obscure or

46. (III/99-100) Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 172–173.

47. *Ibid.*, 183–184.

incomprehensible writings'. He lists four separate stories he recalls reading, which are informing his view. We can, therefore, take for granted that Spinoza is familiar with these texts, and use this to inform our interpretations of other things he has written. Now, given the many references to classical writers in the *Ethics* (Ovid, Terence, Cicero, among others) and Spinoza's well-known stint as a student of Franciscus van den Enden, we have some idea of the sort of literature he would have been familiar with. But what is important is that here Spinoza gives us a principle of interpretation that pertains to obscure or incomprehensible writing.

Is Spinoza's own writing obscure or incomprehensible? Did he think so? In either case, it seems, we nevertheless have a principle which may be useful for guiding our interpretation of Spinoza himself. Accordingly,

Meaning Requires Knowledge. The meaning of some obscure writing, m , requires knowledge, k , of the author(s), which is such that m can be determined.

Call this the *MRK* principle.

What, precisely, does Spinoza have in mind by k ? I have presented evidence which suggests that he takes it to mean, at least, the ways in which the authors are/were accustomed to speak. Customary manners of speech may be understood in many ways, but according to this reading, they are a necessary condition for the possibility of understanding (i.e., knowledge of) an author's words. Knowledge of what an author means to say, in some particular case, that is, depends on and involves the knowledge of what an author can reasonably be believed to have intended to say. The similarity of this claim to 1A4 is intentional. Knowledge of written words is a kind of causal knowledge, and so the axiom must hold for it, or rather, we could think of the *MRU* and *MRK* principles as instantiations of 1A4. Knowledge of an effect depends on and

involves a knowledge of its cause, so the knowledge of the meaning of words depends on and involves the knowledge of their causal sources, which may be found either in their usage or, if this is obscure, in an understanding of the utterers themselves.

In many (or perhaps most) cases, this knowledge will be trivial. We can know what an author means simply by having enough familiarity with the author's linguistic tendencies, especially as regards the use of the words in question. This does not suffice for words, the use of which is obscure because of a lack of use, but we are now in a position to suggest a method for solving this problem.

3.6 Conclusion

To conclude, given Spinoza's commitment to *MRU*, and *MRK*, I believe we have good reason to demand that interpretations of Spinoza's own obscure words, like those of scripture, be justified either by virtue of the discovery of (implicit) usage, or by properly accounting for the manner of speech of the author in such a way that we ensure that we "have some [adequate] knowledge of the authors if we want to interpret their writings."⁴⁸ These principles fall under Spinoza's method because they require that we proceed from what is known, restrict the inference of meaning to natural-causal sources, and help us to avoid wearying the mind, since these principles are the rules by which interpretation of text is to be guided. In the next chapter, it will emerge that language and meaning is a larger problem for interpreting Spinoza than has hitherto been understood.

48. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 183–184.

Chapter 4

Idle Material in Spinoza's Ethics

The method of interpreting nature consists above all in putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things.¹

—*Benedictus de Spinoza*

4.1 Introduction

Spinoza's use of the geometrical method, including the *ordo geometricus*, in his *Ethics*, has provoked responses ranging from adulation to frustration, both in his day and ours.² Studies of Spinoza's philosophy invariably take a stand on both the intended purpose and the effectiveness of this feature of Spinoza's thought. Yet the authors of these studies rarely devote much time to defending their respective views on the matter.³ Thus, despite the widespread consensus that Spinoza uses something called 'geometrical method', there is no corresponding consensus about what Spinoza's

1. *TTP VII* (III/98/19-20).

2. For example, Steenbakkens, "The Geometrical Order in the Ethics"; Runes, *Spinoza Dictionary*. Curley notes "The literary form of the *Ethics* has been a stumbling block to Spinoza's readers from the beginning, partly, perhaps, because that work is so very well worked out." (Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 51).

3. One prominent exceptions is: Hubbeling, *Spinoza's Methodology*.

geometrical method is, nor how we are to interpret his claims in its light, whether from within the framework of the geometrical order of the *Ethics* or otherwise. What's more, the full implications of certain flaws in Spinoza's implementation of the geometrical order in his *Ethics* have not yet been appreciated.

We might pause here, and wonder: why are there elements of the *Ethics* to which Spinoza never explicitly refers?⁴ In this dissertation, I cannot hope to fully answer that question. In fact, a complete answer to it might be impossible, given the fact that we lack an original manuscript of the *Ethics*. The argument of the previous chapter suggests that some questions concerning Spinoza's texts may occupy a similar place to questions concerning obscurity in Scripture. The impossibility of adequately reconstructing the history of the text may render the meaning of some claims in it impossible to settle, and thus make any interpretations which purport to impute meaning to such claims highly suspect.

My aim in this chapter is to provide a convincing case for taking this question seriously. To do this, I will focus on a single, albeit important, element of the text, 1A2. Let me explain why.

In many current interpretations of Spinoza's system, the second axiom of the first part, 1A2, has been an important, and sometimes pivotal, element—supporting assumptions about Spinoza's endorsement of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), and related connections between his metaphysics, epistemology, and the general method of the *Ethics*.⁵

The axiom asserts that “what cannot be conceived through another must be conceived through itself.” 1A2 goes uncited (as do many other elements) in any of

4. I owe this formulation of the problem to an anonymous reviewer for the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*.

5. Especially Della Rocca, *Spinoza*.

the demonstrations of the *Ethics*. Few scholars seem to have noticed this, and the employment of 1A2 as a key feature of interpretations of Spinoza's entire system is both frequent, and highly questionable. In what follows, I do not question Spinoza's commitment to the axiom, whatever it may turn out to mean. Rather, I aim to draw attention specifically to issues of interpretation which arise in the *Ethics*, with 1A2 serving as a paradigm case.

Suppose, quite reasonably, we want to know what some element presented at the outset of the *Ethics* means. The arrangement of the text in geometrical order stands as a *prima facie* reason to take seriously Spinoza's commitment to implications that this may have both for the import of substantive philosophical doctrines and for the interpretation thereof. Indeed, Spinoza seems to take the geometrical method (though it is not clear if he also means the order) to be helpful.⁶ This does not resolve the issue of what, precisely, the method is, and whether, for example, it requires demonstrations in geometrical order. How, then, should we proceed in our interpretations of Spinoza?

As mentioned earlier, Margaret Wilson once said, of the fourth axiom of the *Ethics*, 1A4, "there is not much point in trying either to explain or to justify the axiom in an off-the-cuff manner, without considering in detail what Spinoza does with it."⁷ If Wilson's admonishment is to be taken seriously with respect to the crucial 1A4, then let us take it equally seriously with respect to 1A2. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 3, Spinoza endorses a view of meaning which coheres with Wilson's claim, according to which "Words have a definite meaning only from their use."⁸ Thus, we may surmise that Spinoza's words, in his view, have a definite meaning only from

6. For example, when he says, "but some axioms, or notions, result from other causes which it would be helpful to explain by this method of ours." (2P40s1)

7. Wilson, "CHAPTER 10. Spinoza's Causal Axiom," 160.

8. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, 250.

their use. Ed Curley has also expressed agreement with this reading, noting that,

Spinoza’s initial definitions are not immediately intelligible, any more than his axioms are all as immediately obvious as the parallel with Euclid would encourage us to think they should be. But it is not true that we must first have a firm grasp of Spinoza’s initial assumptions before we can understand what follows from them. Often we can get more of the sense of a formula by seeing what follows from it, or what Spinoza thinks follows from it, than we can by focussing all of our attention on the formula itself.⁹

Furthermore, Eric Schliesser, echoing Wilson and Curley (and Spinoza himself), argues, perhaps more strongly than is necessary, “the geometrical method is not what it seems to be—the meaning of terms only becomes clear by their use subsequently.”¹⁰ I shall call a reformulation of these views Wilson’s Dictum, according to which,

Wilson’s Dictum. Explanation or justification of an element of the *Ethics* requires an account of its use.

Unfortunately, we cannot apply Wilson’s Dictum to 1A2 in precisely the same manner as Wilson could with 1A4. 1A4 has nine explicit instances in the body of the *Ethics*. To explain and justify it, we can compare, contrast, and otherwise analyze these nine cases. With 1A2, we cannot do this, but this does not necessarily mean we cannot explain or justify it. It remains an open question whether there are implicit uses of this axiom (or any other element) hidden among the demonstrations. The task of determining the status of implicit material in the *Ethics* requires an account of how we ought best to interpret Spinoza, and thus, we need a clear account of the role of the geometrical method as it exists in Spinoza’s work.

1A2 is a useful case on which to focus because it presents us with tandem problems: on the one hand, different readings of 1A2 have played a key role in varied, competing

9. Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, 52.

10. James and Schliesser, “Spinoza on the Politics of Philosophical Understanding,” 502.

interpretations of Spinoza; on the other hand, these interpretations are not fully licensed precisely because the status of 1A2 in text has not been fully appreciated. What's more, different interpretations of the function of the geometrical structure of the text itself, which may play a role in how axioms are interpreted, are themselves rendered questionable so long as they also do not adequately account for the status of seemingly unused material.

On the basis of the foregoing, we ought to revisit Spinoza's geometrical method and the status of 1A2 within it. Concomitantly, we ought also to question the use of this axiom by scholars. I argue that the status of 1A2 is ambiguous, and present a case for how we might discern implicit uses of it. More broadly, I contend that the issue of what to make of the fact of unused material in the *Ethics* generally, and 1A2 particularly, is understudied, but key to the interpretation of Spinoza's method.¹¹

4.2 The Role of the Geometrical Method

Let us return for a moment to the geometrical method and the demonstrative order of the *Ethics*, since this is the context in which 1A2 occurs. Accordingly, we can begin to look for its meaning. Piet Steenbakkers has remarked that “[f]rom Spinoza's own

11. In the only case in the English scholarly literature I have found remarking on “unused axioms”, Jon Miller, reviewing Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, argues that “. . . unused axioms constitute a problem for the logical [interpretation of Spinoza's method]: if content fully determines form, then it would seem impossible for Spinoza to present his ideas in so many different ways.” (Miller, “Review of ‘Meaning in Spinoza's Method’,” 202) The literature is scant, but there are two papers that may partially address this issue: Asakura, “Why is there an ‘unused’ axiom in *Ethics*? : A Study of Axiom 2, *Ethics* Part I” and Proietti, “The problem of a useless axiom in writings of Spinoza.” Thanks to Tomoko Higuchi and Oberto Marrama, I have been able to read English translations of both. These papers do both address 1A2, but not in the context of the geometrical method and its interpretation. Their assessments may provide some insight into the composition of the text, but do not situate it in the broader context of the geometrical method, and as such do not address the issues of this chapter. See also the exhaustive charts of the geometrical structure of the *Ethics* at <http://ethics.spinozism.org> (henceforth: *Ethics* 2.0).

point of view, then, the scholia are asides, standing outside the framework of the geometrical exposition. That exposition is called *prolixus*, long-winded, because in it no steps can be skipped: even the seemingly obvious must be explicitly enunciated.”¹² Apparent skipping of steps, or inexplicit usage of an element, therefore, demands an explanation. If this is true, then, at the very least, the fact that 1A2 is not explicitly cited in the text counts as strong evidence that there is a flaw in Spinoza’s application of his *prolixus* method. Steven Nadler has argued similarly that:

This view of the relationship between geometric order and philosophical ideas is a much more interesting and potentially fruitful way of looking at Spinoza’s use of the *ordo geometricus* than the one that sees only an extrinsic connection between the two. It is also a more plausible reading. Since we know that Spinoza gave a good deal of attention to how he should communicate his ideas, it is highly unlikely that his adoption of the geometric mode of presentation for his philosophy bears no connection whatsoever with the content of that philosophy, a philosophy whose central metaphysical doctrine is the geometrical necessity that governs Nature itself. Indeed Spinoza explicitly tells us that the goal of philosophical method is to make the order and connection of ideas in the mind mirror the order and connection of things in reality.¹³

In fact, Nadler does not suggest that it is merely unlikely that the *ordo geometricus* is extrinsic to the content of Spinoza’s philosophy, but outright rejects this possibility, saying “the *ordo geometricus* is not just a convenient and particularly persuasive way for Spinoza to present his ideas.”¹⁴ He clarifies, however that he “would not go so far as to insist that Spinoza’s thought demands or necessitates a literally Euclidean style. Rather, I would like to say instead that his philosophy finds its most adequate (but not necessarily only) expression in that mode of presentation.”¹⁵ Thus, Nadler presents Spinoza’s use of the *ordo geometricus* as intrinsic in some way to his philosophizing,

12. Steenbakkers, “The Geometrical Order in the Ethics,” 51.

13. Nadler, *Spinoza’s ‘Ethics’: An Introduction*, 42.

14. *Ibid.*, 43.

15. *Ibid.*

though not so intrinsic that we must therefore consign geometrically unused material to the flames. From this it is still not clear whether 1A2 is superfluous with respect to Spinoza's project. It may be objected that perhaps 1A2 is simply superfluous, and superfluity need not violate the methodological demand for prolixity. This is true just in case none of the arguments in the *Ethics* requires 1A2 for its demonstration. Yet, we cannot necessarily determine whether arguments may require an element if we cannot settle the precise meaning it has. So, an account which casts the axiom aside in this manner does nothing to resolve the problem of interpreting Spinoza's meaning. Furthermore, since Steenbakkers, Nadler, and Joachim all agree that the geometrical order is "not an external shape, with little or no direct relevance for the philosophical content, but it is intimately connected with Spinoza's philosophy"¹⁶ it would be premature to simply deny this assumption without addressing the methodological problem of interpretation in the first place. On such grounds, the fact that 1A2 is not 'explicitly enunciated' demands an explanation.

Conversely, Hubertus Hubbeling has argued that,

for Spinoza his geometric method was not a rigid construction. He was always prepared to replace his definitions and axioms by better ones in order to acquire a better deduction of the propositions to be proved. Spinoza's definitions and axioms are, however, not arbitrary. He is convinced of their truth. If they are replaced by other ones this is due to the fact that the original ones can be proved from these.¹⁷

Hubbeling's view, starkly contrasting with Steenbakkers', implies that the geometrical constructions are taken to be, if not disconnected, at least only loosely connected to the philosophical content. Despite this, the truth of the definitions and axioms is maintained. This is a useful approach to take, *prima facie*, for cases in which the

16. Steenbakkers, "The Geometrical Order in the Ethics," 55.

17. Hubbeling, "The Development of Spinoza's Axiomatic (Geometric) Method," 65.

internal structure of an element seems sound (i.e., where an element does not appear patently absurd on its face), since it takes Spinoza seriously as a philosopher until evidence is provided to the contrary. Thus, even on a more flexible interpretation of the geometrical method, without contradictory evidence, an axiom which has no explicit references should still be considered true.

But what is it that is being endorsed as true? Given the veridicality condition of axioms and Wilson’s Dictum, we have no clear picture of how to discern what, exactly, Spinoza is endorsing in 1A2 (nor, indeed, many other elements, as we shall see in the next section). So far, this amounts to a mostly negative thesis about certain features of Spinoza’s *Ethics* in current scholarship. To say something more about 1A2, or any other element the use of which is not explicit in the demonstrations (at least, where the veridicality condition is maintained) we ought to determine conditions under which elements may be employed implicitly. Despite the admitted prolixity of the geometrical presentation, Spinoza’s *Ethics* is not a perfect exemplar of the style.

4.3 Implicitness and ‘Idle Material’

If we group propositions and their respective sub-elements together as units (for the sake of expedience) then there are some 370 main elements comprising Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Of these, 80 are not explicitly used. These elements comprise: 43 propositions, 26 definitions of the affects, four definitions, three axioms, two lemmas, and two postulates.¹⁸

It is straightforward to justify setting aside the propositions and the definitions of the affects, though there are some cases among these that warrant further investigation.

18. As I show in the next chapter, there are also 25 corollaries that are unused. These are treated similarly to propositions.

In most cases, geometrically idle propositions are simply conclusions Spinoza has reached. The meaning of these propositions can be derived from an analysis of the uses of their constituent parts, because as Balibar suggests, “a proposition from the *Ethics* cannot be separated from its demonstration. The demonstration determines the meaning of the proposition by showing how it is necessarily connected to other propositions.”¹⁹ This is not a complete account of the meaning of a proposition, however, since by the *MRU* principle, we also need to know how both the constituent elements of the demonstration are used more generally, and how the proposition itself is used.

The list of definitions of the affects is also largely geometrically idle, but given the relationship this list has with its ancestors in Descartes and Hobbes, there seems to be little mystery about why the remainder of the *Ethics* does not include an unfolding of the implications of every single one of these definitions.²⁰ There is a similar, albeit more complicated, account which may be given of some elements of the physical digression after 2P13. For now, let us briefly consider the concept of ‘implicitness’ in general, though with particular emphasis on how this may affect axioms and definitions, before returning to the question of the status of 1A2.

The following are strong candidate explanations for an element’s lack of explicit use:

1. Spinoza intended to use it, but either
 - (i) never needed to, or
 - (ii) never got around to it.

19. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 80.

20. Cf. Curley: “Note that Spinoza’s definitions of the affects are developed gradually through the course of his deductive treatment of the affects. They do not precede it, as the axiomatic model would lead us to expect.” (Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume I, 535)

2. Spinoza simply intended to assert some truth that happens to have no direct use in the demonstrations either because
 - (i) it constitutes a philosophical end-point in the system or
 - (ii) it turns out to be unnecessary for Spinoza’s purposes in the text.
3. Spinoza ought to have used it, but failed to do so.
4. Spinoza uses it implicitly.

There may be other possibilities, but the preceding four strike me as the most plausible. To arrive at an adequate account of the status of 1A2, we ought to rule out competing explanations, and this requires a general account of implicitness in the *Ethics*.

One difficulty with attempts to determine implicit use is that there are at least two possible ways an element, *a*, could be employed implicitly in the *Ethics*:

Implicitness 1. *a* is implicit just in case, during an argument, some or all of *a* occurs.

Implicitness 2. *a* is implicit just in case an argument lacks both explicit reference to *a*, and lacks *Implicitness* (1), but logically requires *a*.²¹

We can determine whether there are any cases of *Implicitness* (1) simply by searching the text for explicit instances of all or part of *a*. Determining clear cases of *Implicitness* (2), however, requires a much more thorough examination of the demonstrations of the *Ethics* than is feasible in this dissertation.²²

If, for any element, no implicit cases of either type can be found, many possible explanations could be offered. Permit me to suggest just a few: Spinoza may have

21. Jonathan Bennett agrees. ‘Sometimes,’ he says, “we should treat a defective argument as a valid one with a premiss left unstated.” (Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 25)

22. In fact, certainty about *Implicitness* (2) in some cases may depend solely on the cogency of an interpretation of Spinoza’s entire project. Bennett’s caution with respect to the content of Spinoza’s mind ought to be taken seriously.

discovered that it was unnecessary to utilize an element directly, and instead obtained a required result from definitions, or elsewhere. In the case of 1A2, the fact that the axiom is explicitly stated at the outset, but never again mentioned, may mean either that Spinoza intended to redact it, or that he thought it worthwhile to leave it explicitly stated despite its lack of explicit use. There does not appear to be a readily available philosophical explanation for why this is the case.²³

As far as I can gather, in the hitherto existing work on Spinoza’s method, scholars have not distinguished the six explicitly used axioms in the first part of the *Ethics* from the other axiom (1A2) whose usage, if there be any, is implicit. There are fourteen direct uses of six of the axioms in *Ethics* I, but, as I have been pointing out, references to 1A2 are conspicuously absent from any demonstrations in the *Ethics*. Thus, it may be the case that 1A2 plays a markedly different role from the other axioms, or it may be that it plays no role at all. What’s more, in accordance with Wilson’s Dictum, we have not yet determined the way to settle this matter.

One important feature of *Implicitness* (2) is that it is by nature interpretive, and thus a case for it must always be made on grounds which extend to some degree beyond the text of the *Ethics*. If this is not the case, then it seems that we must be resigned to a certain degree of uncertainty about the status of this last ‘unused’ axiom, at least insofar as the geometrical method is concerned.

23. Cf. A11 of Spinoza’s *PPC I*. The claim is attributed to Descartes, and then employed by Spinoza in: *PPC I* Demonstration of P7 (after Lemma 2) and P16 Alt. Dem. The fact that this version of the PSR is employed in the demonstrations explicitly shows that at the very least Spinoza did not necessarily take it to be so obvious that it would not require signposting.

4.4 Why is 1A2 such a problem?

To make clear why inexplicit or implicit usage of elements is a problem for current scholarship, consider the following general remark about the geometrical structure of the text. Aaron Garrett argues that “the metaphysics that Spinoza presents in *Ethics* I is derived not just from definitions but also from seven axioms or common notions. [...] They are all very important.”²⁴ Compare this to Garrett’s assessment of the axioms of *Ethics* V, “Given that Part V has no definitions, we might assume that the two axioms are of great importance. Oddly, they are hardly employed.”²⁵ If the metaphysics is truly derived from all seven of these axioms, then it is striking that six of them are used explicitly, and one never is.

Additionally, Michael Della Rocca has argued that 1A2 plays an important role in Spinoza’s philosophy.²⁶ Della Rocca ties Spinoza’s commitment to the PSR directly to 1A2, and takes this commitment to be central to Spinoza’s philosophy. As with claims such as Garrett’s above, the fact that 1A2 is never explicitly employed by Spinoza provides at least some reason to reconsider Della Rocca’s arguments and their impact on the interpretation of the *Ethics*.

I must mention that Della Rocca takes 1P11d2 to involve the clearest expression of Spinoza’s commitment to the PSR. My argument here does not concern that claim, but such other claims as the following:

24. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza’s Method*, 24–25.

25. *Ibid.*, 193.

26. See, also: Della Rocca, “A Rationalist Manifesto”; Della Rocca, *Spinoza*; Della Rocca, “PSR” Martin Lin and Yitzhak Melamed agree: “In Spinoza’s major work, the *Ethics*, the PSR is stated implicitly already by the second axiom of Part I: E1A2: What cannot be conceived [concipi] through itself, must be conceived through another. The immediate implication of E1A2 is that everything is conceived. Since, for Spinoza, to conceive something is to explain it (see E1P10s, E1P14d and [Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 5]) it seems that E1A2 amounts to the claim that everything is explainable.” (Melamed and Lin, *Principle of Sufficient Reason*)

Consider also 1A2: ‘What cannot be conceived through another must be conceived through itself.’ Here Spinoza says, in effect, that each thing must be conceived through something (either itself or another thing). For Spinoza to conceive of a thing is to explain it. Thus, in presupposing in 1A2 that everything can be conceived through something, Spinoza presupposes that everything is able to be explained, he builds the notion of intelligibility into the heart of his metaphysical system.²⁷

To justify using 1A2 in this way, we should first look to the *Ethics* to see if there are any places where the axiom is partially repeated or at work in some otherwise implicit way. But this is not the only instance in which Della Rocca invokes 1A2 in support of an otherwise cogent interpretation of Spinoza’s views.

Later in his *Spinoza*, Della Rocca twice invokes 1A2, both again to connect the PSR to Spinoza.

For Spinoza, everything must be determined either by itself or by another thing (see 1A2). As we have seen, this is simply a manifestation of the PSR. And, as we also saw in the previous section, this is equivalent to the claim that everything is either a substance or a mode of a substance.²⁸

And once more:

For Spinoza, everything can be grasped by the infinite intellect—anything that could not be so grasped could not be conceived, but, according to 1A2, everything can be conceived. Thus, it follows from 1P16 that God’s nature determines everything, and there seems to be every reason to think that, for Spinoza, ‘everything’ includes the total state of the world.²⁹

Each of Della Rocca’s three preceding arguments advances a strong reading of the role of conception in Spinoza’s metaphysics. 1A2 appears to play a crucial role in this influential interpretation of Spinoza’s system, yet Della Rocca has assigned it a

27. Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 5.

28. *Ibid.*, 70.

29. *Ibid.*, 76–77.

meaning which actively supports the conclusions he is trying to reach. This is not enough to say that Spinoza does not endorse such views, but rather that the confidence with which one ascribes such content to an axiom which one then employs to justify further evidence of Spinoza's adherence to some doctrine is not warranted by the evidence. To demonstrate just how problematic such maneuvers are, let's look at another notable case.

Henry Allison constructs the following argument, intended to be consistent with Spinoza's system, which explicitly employs 1A2:

Although Spinoza never explicitly develops such an argument, one can easily be constructed on his principles. Its starting point is the axiom that 'what cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself' (A2), which amounts to the claim that everything is explicable. Given this axiom, together with the principle that whatever exists in itself—that is, is ontologically independent—cannot be conceived through or explained in terms of something else, it follows that whatever truly exists in itself must also be conceived through itself. Correlatively, whatever can be conceived through itself must also exist in itself. Since, according to Spinoza, 'the knowledge of an effect depends on and involves, the knowledge of its cause' (A4), if something existed in something else—that is, if it were causally dependent on something else—then it would likewise have to be conceived in terms of this cause, which contradicts the original assumption. But (by A2) if it does not exist in another, it must exist in itself.³⁰

Although Allison does not mention that the axiom itself is never explicitly used, he is at least clear that in this case, the argument involving it constitutes a synthetic exercise developed by means of, but not explicitly in, the *Ethics*.³¹ The question remains, however: why does Spinoza not use the axiom himself, explicitly? Arguments constructed using this axiom may indeed present novel implications of Spinoza's views, but they are premature precisely because we have not established how Spinoza himself

30. Allison, *Benedict de Spinoza : an introduction*, 47.

31. We might thus ask: is this argument, implicitly, in the *Ethics*? If we could find an answer to that question in the text, then it would be enough to justify the inclusion of the axiom in the system.

uses 1A2. We have not yet arrived at the means to evaluate whether the meaning ascribed to it in such reconstructions is philosophically permissible, which I shall now illustrate further.

Wolfson suggests another possible implicit case: "...at the very outset of the Ethics, Proposition I, together with Definitions III and V and Axioms I and II upon which it is based, emerges as a distinct topic by itself, which we label the definition of substance and mode."³²

This, however, is merely an intuitive inference on the part of Wolfson—on what grounds could such an inference be made? The official line of reasoning given by Spinoza actually goes like this: "P1: A substance is prior in nature to its affections. Dem.: This is evident from D3 and D5." If this is evident from the two definitions, then why does Wolfson bring up these axioms at all? He later clarifies,

Substance, on the contrary, 'is in itself' absolutely, and 'is conceived through itself,' inasmuch as it is a *summum genus*. But to be conceived through itself is really a negation. It does not mean anything positively. All it means is that it cannot be conceived through anything else. This is the significance of Axiom II... The emphasis is that to be conceived through itself merely means not to be conceived through something else. The implication therefore is that Spinoza's substance is inconceivable, and its essence undefinable and hence unknowable.³³

In the footnote of the preceding text, referring to a later discussion of the relation of the attributes to Substance, Wolfson contends,

The God or substance of Spinoza, like the God of mediaeval rationalists, is unknowable in His essence. He may indeed, in Spinoza's view, be immediately

32. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, 5.

33. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, 76. Note that Wolfson's view of the implications of 1A2 seems to contradict the implications Allison and Della Rocca take it to have (i.e., of implying universal conceivability)! Don Garrett sides with the latter two as well: "Whatever the nature of the distinction between substance and its affections may be, the postulation of anything unknowable or inconceivable seems incompatible with Spinoza's philosophical outlook in general and with Ia2 in particular." (n. 15 Garrett, "Spinoza's Conatus Argument," 156)

perceived by intuition as a clear and distinct idea, but He is not subject to knowledge that defines its object in terms broader and more general.³⁴

Thus, Wolfson's much-maligned subjective interpretation of the Attributes of Substance is directly bound up with his interpretation of 1A2. If Spinoza intends 1A2 to imply that we cannot conceive Substance per se, then it would follow that what we perceive as constituting the essence of Substance would not be the essence of Substance.

Importantly, however, the axiom appears to be idle in the text—Wolfson does not provide any textual reason to think Spinoza is utilizing it implicitly—and so to assume that this is what Spinoza had in mind appears to be nothing more than conjecture, even if it is rigorously defended conjecture made on the basis of connections to historical sources. Perhaps Wolfson is right, and this subjective implication is what Spinoza had in mind, but, following Wilson's Dictum, we ought to ask ourselves: how is it used?

At this point, if 1A2 is employed in such an *Implicitness* (2) sort of way, then it is not clear what the appropriate conditions for accepting such a claim about Spinoza's arguments (or his mind) are. At best, we can hypothesize, relying on some interpretation or other of the method, and of the meaning of the axiom. And it is in precisely such cases that we ought to be wary of falling into presumptive traps.³⁵

Following a similar path to Wolfson, Charles Jarrett presents a much stronger case for implicit use in the *Ethics* while tempering this with a commitment to the virtue of

34. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, 142.

35. In conversation, Jarrett has suggested to me that one way to discern the meaning of 1A2 would be to look for instances of 'conceived through' and try to work out what this means. This is, indeed, one potential way to try to settle the sense of the axiom. But, it does not necessarily settle the whole matter, for it may only provide us with partial meaning. Furthermore, we still need to take care not to argue circularly for the meaning of the 'conceived through' relation in other places it occurs, which may occur through inadvertent application of a presupposed interpretation of the axiom.

textual accuracy:

I have attempted to stay as close as possible to the actual evidence of the text, in determining how Spinoza is to be represented. The major assumption on which I proceed is that Spinoza was serious in attempting to present a consistent axiomatized theory of metaphysics (and of epistemology, psychology, and ethics, derivable from this metaphysics, on the addition of a small number of definitions and axioms).³⁶

Thus, Jarrett agrees with Wilson's Dictum in recognizing that it is the text that allows us to say what Spinoza means. He also takes a strong line on the purportedly Euclidean presentation. It is this assumption of a strict unity between content and form that may be rendered untenable by our investigation.

The first mention of the axiom occurs in Jarrett's discussion of 1D3. 1A2, he argues, "licenses the addition in Definition (iii) of '*hoc est id, cujus conceptus non indiget conceptu alterius rei, a quo formari debeat.*'"³⁷ As with Della Rocca's interpretation of 1A2 as a version of the PSR, such a claim might seem reasonable on its face. But as we have seen, this is not enough. Jarrett's justification of his claim is problematic:

As far as I know, however, the axiom is not used anywhere in the *Ethics* in the above form. Its converse, however, seems to be used implicitly in II, vi, d, where I, x, which states that each attribute must be conceived through itself, is cited in justification for saying that each attribute is conceived through itself and without another. Hence I, Ax. ii should in my view be regarded as a biconditional, and this justifies the equation of '*x* is conceived through itself' with '*x* is not conceived through another' in I, Def. iii.³⁸

Jarrett is right, as it turns out, that the axiom is not used anywhere in the *Ethics* directly. It is unclear, however, why, as a matter of interpretation, it is permissible

36. Jarrett, "The Logical Structure of Spinoza's "Ethics", Part I," 16.

37. Jarrett, "The Logical Structure of Spinoza's "Ethics", Part I," 20. The phrase is left in the Latin in Jarrett's text, but translated, reads "that is, that which does not require the concept of another thing, through which it must be formed."

38. Ibid.

to move from a seeming implicit use of a converse claim to the claim that the axiom itself must be a bi-conditional, and therefore in use, in some sense, in the definition.

The purported implicit instance of (the converse of the stated version of) 1A2 is supposed to occur here:

For each attribute is conceived through itself without any other (by IP10). So the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one; and so (by IA4) they have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other, q.e.d. (2P6d)

The text of 1P10 reads “each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself”, and the demonstration of this employs 1D4 and 1D3, apparently without need for 1A2. There is nothing here which implies that 1P10 is true because of either 1A2 or its converse. If the converse of 1A2 is true, it seems it would indeed follow from this that the attributes cannot be conceived through any other attributes, but this is irrelevant, because Spinoza proceeds immediately to a use of 1A4 (“the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause”) to ultimately justify 2P6.

The full version of Spinoza’s official argument goes like this:

1. By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed. [1D3]
2. By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence. [1D4]
3. So, each attribute must be conceived through itself. [1P10]
4. So, the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one. [by 3]

5. So, God is the cause of modes only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, not insofar as he is considered under any other. [by 4 and 1A4]

Jarrett's modification goes as follows:

1. What cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself. [1A2]
2. Some x is conceived through itself if and only if x is not conceived through another. [Biconditional formulation of 1A2]
3. What must be conceived through itself cannot be conceived through another. [Converse of 1A2 by (2)]
4. By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., [by (3)] that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed. [1D3]
5. By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence. [1D4]
6. So, each attribute must be conceived through itself. [1P10, by (4), (5)]
7. So, the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one. [by (6) and 1A4]
8. So, God is the cause of modes only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, not insofar as he is considered under any other. [by (7)]

This suggests that to understand the definition of God, 1D3, we need to understand the biconditional logic of conceptual containment which is latent in 1A2. This may be a true interpretation of 1A2, but, as with Della Rocca's case, it risks begging the question because we lack additional justification for this interpretation of the axiom.

Such interpretations seem to assume that we already know what it is in Spinoza's view for something to be 'conceived through'. Jarrett's interpretation suggests that 1A2 means that 'conceived through itself' rules out being conceived through another.

This interpretation is justified, on the grounds that if we accept such a biconditional reading, it justifies part of 1D3: ‘that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing’, and thus justifies 1P10 and therefore justifies 2P6. But why should we think that this is how the axiom is used, and thus that this is how Spinoza must mean it?

For one thing, the claim in 1D3 is not clearly connected to the strict bi-conditionality implied by this interpretation of 1A2: to say that x does not require [*indiget*] y is not necessarily to say that x is the case if and only if it is not possible that y . Spinoza’s formulation in 1D3 is potentially ambiguous between Jarrett’s reading and a less restrictive reading in which, although a substance is essentially (i.e., by definition) conceived through itself, it is nevertheless still possible for it to be conceived through something else.³⁹

Spinoza does not begin to prove the uniqueness of Substance until 1P5 and 1P6, where he tellingly argues “(by 1D3 and 1A6), considered truly, one [substance] *cannot be conceived* to be distinguished from another.”⁴⁰ This again does not seem to require the converse of 1A2 in 1D3, since all Spinoza needs here is the claim that substance (by definition) is conceived through itself, and so a true idea of it (by 1A6) must be of a thing conceived through itself, not of something else, because true ideas must agree with their objects. It might still be the case that things that are conceivable through themselves can be conceived through other things, perhaps just not truly. I do not

39. In conversation with Jarrett, he has suggested to me that Boscherini, *Lexicon Spinozanum* may be of great value. I agree, especially with respect to its discussion of the concept of ‘conceived through’, which Jarrett still emphasizes may provide us with a means to interpret what the axiom means. I can only add here that Boscherini’s exceptional contribution to the scholarship, while potentially illuminating, does not take into account the structural flaws in the text in the way that I have endeavoured to do here. This is not a flaw in Boscherini’s massive project, but rather a reflection of the plurality of ways in which scholarship can proceed. I am indebted to Jarrett’s early suggestions and criticism, and I hope that I have done his work some justice.

40. Emphasis mine.

intend to fully endorse this reading here. I am only suggesting that the meaning of the claims is not so easily settled. Meaning may nevertheless be determined, however, by following Wilson's Dictum.

4.5 Conclusion

Certain claims of the foregoing scholars are questionable because they rely on an axiom, the meaning of which is obscured by its lack of explicit use. Yet, this is not cause for utter despair about the state of Spinoza's *mos geometricus*. What can we say about the method?

A strict interpretation of the *ordo geometricus*, such as Steenbakkers', on which Spinoza is committed to making everything explicit, now seems implausible, not just because the *Ethics* contains alternative demonstrations, or because in later drafts, some axioms became propositions,⁴¹ but also because this interpretation cannot make much sense of implicit usage of elements. Conversely, views such as Hubbeling's may run into similar problems of interpretation of material which may go unnoticed or be under-appreciated precisely because geometrical features of the text are downplayed. This chapter attempts to present a more nuanced picture of Spinoza's employment of what looks, and sometimes functions, like Euclidean or axiomatic method. From this standpoint, claims regarding apparently unused elements may be vindicated by finding implicit uses, or by otherwise determining meaning, with respect to Spinoza's unquestionable commitment to something evinced by the element being included in the text in the first place.

41. See *Ep. IV* to Henry Oldenburg, especially: "... that the Axioms ought not to be counted as common Notions. I have no quarrel with that. But you also doubt their truth..." (171 Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, (IV/13/25-30))

Additionally, I have argued that Wilson's Dictum provides a clear criterion of interpretation which concords with Spinoza's own understanding of how words can have meaning. Finally, I contend that Spinoza's geometrical method though impressive and often rigorous, contains flaws for which scholars have yet to hold Spinoza to account.

Chapter 5

The Ends of the *Ethics*, or the Sixty-eight Theses

Se non è vero, è molto ben trovato.¹²

—*Giordano Bruno*

5.1 Introduction

The *Ethics* is a peculiar work of philosophy. Much has been made of how difficult it is even to begin reading the text, which begins with a cold open, propounding obscure and undefended definitions and axioms. Less attention has been paid to the way in which Spinoza's use of the geometrical order produces a significant number of abrupt conclusions, or of the way in which these conclusions may or may not hang together.

One reason for this scholarly deficit is that the geometrical order produces a high degree of argumentative complexity. This complexity is not immediately evident from any particular demonstration. It is easy enough to select a proposition and analyze its demonstration. It is more difficult to extend this analysis to the components and their demonstrations. Nevertheless, one may even manage to follow this method all

1. Bruno, *De gli eroici furori*, 226.

2. My translation: "If it is not true, it is very well-found."

the way back to its foundations. It is at least an order of magnitude more difficult to apply this strategy to the text as a whole.

There is, however, an intermediate step which can reveal much about Spinoza's philosophy: it is possible to examine, exhaustively, the set of elements which play no further explicit role in the demonstrations, and thus appear to be the desired conclusions of Spinoza's geometrical approach. Perhaps the strongest reason for performing this task is that it can provide us with a complete picture of the philosophical doctrines toward which Spinoza aimed his *Ethics*. With such a picture in hand, the case for Spinozism as a *Weltanschauung* is laid bare, so that it may stand or fall as a unit.

To begin this seemingly Herculean task, it ought to be settled just how many elements fall into the conclusion-set. Out of the eighty main elements that lack explicit mention in the demonstrations of the *Ethics*, forty-three of them are labeled 'proposition' by Spinoza. There are a further twenty-five corollaries to which Spinoza never again refers explicitly. Justification for these corollaries is, presumably, derived from the demonstrations of their respective propositions. It is an open question whether these conclusions are also intended to play a role in how one reads or understands other things Spinoza says, and if so, how to understand this role.

Answering the question of what role, if any, 'conclusions' play in the *Ethics* is perhaps especially difficult in the case of early propositions (1P9, 1P16c2, 1P16c3, 1P17c1, 1P18, 1P20c1, 1P31), because, by virtue of their early occurrence, these propositions will lack the sort of systematic justification for their interpretation, which may be easier to muster for later ones. Thus, there are sixty-eight claims in total that I argue constitute the major conclusions (or perhaps better: doctrines) of the *Ethics*

insofar as it is arranged according to the geometrical order.³

The existence in the first part of the *Ethics* of propositions that appear to drop out of explicit use entirely suggests that Spinoza may hold these to be important general doctrines, the application of which is difficult to explicate in particular cases. Potential explanations for this are manifold—perhaps there are simply too many places in which these doctrines are in play, resulting in an exceedingly repetitive text, going beyond any pedagogical or logical necessity. Alternatively, some of these cases may simply be a result of inadequacy or outright flaws in the text.

Conversely, there are many propositions that without any doubt number among Spinoza's intended main conclusions (especially those at the very end of the book, including 5P34, 5P39, 5P41, and 5P42). We shall also see that the unused propositions in the middle parts may be amenable to these or other explanations. I am not primarily concerned with explanations for why these propositions are unused, but rather, supposing that these propositions constitute, *prima facie*, Spinoza's ultimate conclusions in the *Ethics* (by virtue of lacking further explicit reference), I wish to examine what these conclusions, taken together, amount to as a matter of philosophical doctrine. To my knowledge, such an analysis of the *Ethics* has never been produced in quite this manner. A new Spinoza, or at least a clearer one, may emerge as a result. This is true both for content and for form. The *ordo geometricus* is the mechanism by

3. Of course there is an obvious sense in which *every* Proposition is a conclusion. I am concerned, as I have said, with those demonstrated elements that do not figure explicitly in any further demonstrations of the *Ethics*. The geometric ordering of the text lends itself to this analysis, though it has been difficult to produce an exhaustive and reliable list without the aid of computers. One previous attempt that has been shared in Spinoza-circles for many years is a deductive ancestry chart composed by hand, by Jonathan Bennett many years ago. This was an admirable attempt to deal with the structure of the *Ethics*. With computers, this task becomes much easier, and we can easily generate an ancestry chart, a progeny chart, flag and count explicit usage, and perform other manipulations of the data. For examples of this, see my *Ethics* 2.0. Even with such a list, the task is still daunting. Nevertheless, I intend to work through the list with the hopes that it displays Spinoza in a new light.

which this revised Spinoza emerges.

In order of appearance, these ultimate conclusions (or doctrines)⁴ are as follows:⁵

Table 5.1: Conclusions by Part

<i>Ethics I</i>	<i>Ethics II</i>	<i>Ethics III</i>	<i>Ethics IV</i>	<i>Ethics V</i>
1P9	2P2	3P1c	4P2	5P4c
1P16c2	2P4	3P27c2	4P7c	5P18c
1P16c3	2P5	3P36c	4P13	5P19
1P17c1	2L3c	3P38	4P14	5P20
1P18	2P36	3P40c1	4P32	5P26
1P20c1	2P42	3P41c	4P35c2	5P28
1P31	2P44c1	3P45	4P40	5P34
	2P49c	3P46	4P42	5P34c
		3P50	4P45c2	5P36c
		3P55sc	4P47	5P39
			4P48	5P40c
			4P49	5P41
			4P50c	5P42
			4P51	
			4P53	
			4P54	
			4P56	
			4P56c	
			4P57	
			4P58	
			4P60	
			4P66c	
			4P67	
			4P68	
			4P69	
			4P69c	
			4P70	
			4P71	
			4P72	

4. Below, I will refer to these elements with various terms. They are all intended to denote propositions and corollaries that are not referred to explicitly in the demonstrations of the *Ethics*, and as such are therefore end-points of that system.

5. For the complete list, including the content of each proposition, see Appendix A.

Table 5.1: (continued)

<i>Ethics I</i>	<i>Ethics II</i>	<i>Ethics III</i>	<i>Ethics IV</i>	<i>Ethics V</i>
			4P73	

It may at first be surprising to discover that a number of claims from the first part of the *Ethics* are not explicitly referred to in the rest of the text. The content of these propositions, however, helps to make sense of what Spinoza is up to. In proceeding sections, I will stay as close as possible to the divisions of the text, except where an excursus seems necessary to maintain cohesion. The content of these propositions will illuminate Spinoza's deepest concerns: the necessity of the nature of things, the sources of error, and confusion, and truth, the causes of and solutions to Hate, and the highest possible good we can achieve. Demonstrating that these are Spinoza's conclusions is valuable because this is a new way to expose the true intent of the author, and the purpose behind his arguments. If we employ the lessons of the previous chapters, this new data may even help remove some of the obscurity in Spinoza's other idle material. At the same time, we might also discover that these propositions can take us beyond the geometrical method.

5.2 God or Nature

The conclusions of *Ethics I*, and the first few conclusions of *Ethics II* (which may have originally been conceived as part of *Ethics I*), largely concern features of God. They are as follows:

- C1: The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it. (1P9)
- C2: It follows, secondly, that God is a cause through himself and not an accidental cause. (1P16c2)

- C3: It follows, thirdly, that God is absolutely the first cause. (1P16c3)
- C4: From this it follows, first, that there is no cause, either extrinsically or intrinsically, which prompts God to action, except the perfection of his nature. (1P17c1)
- C5: God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things. (1P18)
- C6: From this it follows, first, that God's existence, like his essence, is an eternal truth. (1P20c1)
- C7: The actual intellect, whether finite or infinite, like will, desire, love, etc., must be referred to *Natura naturata*, not to *Natura naturans*. (1P31)
- C8: Extension is an attribute of God, or God is an extended thing. (2P2)
- C9: God's idea, from which infinitely many things follow in infinitely many modes, must be unique. (2P4)
- C10: The formal being of ideas admits God as a cause only insofar as he is considered as a thinking thing, and not insofar as he is explained by any other attribute. I.e., ideas, both of God's attributes and of singular things, admit not the objects themselves, or the things perceived, as their efficient cause, but God himself, insofar as he is a thinking thing. (2P5)

Many of these propositions, especially C2, C3, C4, and C5, bear a striking resemblance to a list the young Spinoza provides in the *KV*, which for the sake of comparison I reproduce below:⁶

- a) We say that God is an emanative or productive cause of his actions, and in respect to the action's occurring, an active or efficient cause. We treat this as one thing, because they involve each other.
- b) He is an immanent and not a transitive cause, since he does everything in himself, and not outside himself (because outside him there is nothing).
- c) God is a free cause, not a natural one, as we shall show very clearly when we treat the question whether God can omit doing what he does? At that point we shall explain what true freedom consists in.
- d) God is a cause through himself, and not an accidental cause. This will be more evident after our discussion of predestination.

6. Gebhardt, *Spinoza*, I/35/15–I/36/20.

- e) God is a principal cause of the effects he has created immediately, such as motion in matter, etc., where there can be no place for the subsidiary cause, which is confined to particular things (as when God makes the sea dry by a strong wind, and similarly in all particular things in Nature).

The subsidiary initiating cause is not applicable to God, because there is nothing outside him that could constrain him. The predisposing cause, on the other hand, is his perfection itself, through which he is both a cause of himself, and consequently of all other things.

- f) God alone is the first, or initiating, cause, as is clear from our preceding proof.
- g) God is also a general cause, but only in the respect that he produces different things. Otherwise, such a thing can never be said of him. For he does not need anyone to produce effects.
- h) God is the proximate cause of those things that are infinite and immutable, and which we say that he has created immediately; but he is, in a sense, the remote cause of all particular things.

Much of this list is not original to Spinoza. He prefaces his remarks by admitting “it is customary to divide the efficient cause into eight parts.” Curley points out that “this division of causes is to be found in Burgersdijk’s *Logic* and, with a slight variation in the order, in Heereboord’s *Meletemata*.”⁷ Burgersdijk writes most clearly, “*Quot modis dividitur causa efficiens? Octo potissimum modis.*”⁸⁹ I have partially translated and summarized Burgersdijk’s list of the divisions of efficient cause as follows:

1. emanative [generally speaking] or active (*Causa efficiens alia est emanativa vulgò diéta , alia activa.*)
2. immanent or transitive (*Causa efficiens, vel est immanens , vel transiens.*)
3. free or necessary (*Causa efficiens alia libera est, alia necessarià.*)

7. Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, 80

8. Burgersdijk, *Franconis Burgersdick Institutionum logicarum synopsis, sive Rudimenta logica. In quibus præcipuæ definitiones, divisiones, & regulæ, ad artem logicam pertinentes, per quæstiones & responsiones, breviter & dilucide proponuntur; in usum scholarum Hollandicarum*, 27.

9. My translation: “How many ways is efficient cause divided? Eight most prominent ways.”

4. through itself or by accident. (*Causa efficiens alia est per se, alia per accidens.*)
5. principal or subordinate (*Causa efficiens alia est principalis, alia minus principalis.*)
6. first or second (*Causa efficiens, vel est prima, vel secunda.*)
7. universal or particular (*Causa efficiens alia est universàlis , alia particularis.*)
8. proximate or remote (*Causa efficiens alia est proxima, alia remota.*)¹⁰

These divisions characterize efficient causes generally, and it is striking that Spinoza applies them, or versions of them, directly to God.

A number of these items are either identical, or very similar, to either propositions we have listed above, or to other propositions in the *Ethics*.¹¹ It is certainly interesting that in Spinoza's mature philosophy, he considers it worthwhile to *demonstrate* that these claims follow from his own premises, or according to his own way of thinking.

5.2.1 Reality or Being

The first proposition in our list, C1, does not directly refer to God, but it does have far-reaching consequences for both God and things. C1 occurs directly following an extended scholium concerning the first eight propositions of the *Ethics*. The proposition states: "The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it." The demonstration is terse: "This is evident from 1D4." That is, this claim is evident from the definition of Attribute. What is going on here?

10. Burgersdijk, *Franconis Burgersdick Institutionum logicarum synopsis, sive Rudimenta logica. In quibus præcipuæ definitiones, divisiones, & regulæ, ad artem logicam pertinentes, per quæstiones & responsiones, breviter & dilucide proponuntur; in usum scholarum Hollandicarum*, 27–30.

11. E.g., item (c) is found in the *Ethics* at 1P17c2, and some of Burgersdijk's divisions look very similar to the axioms of the first part of the *Ethics*. E.g., 1A1 seems to be an ontological equivalent (on Spinoza's view that God is an efficient cause) of the division into cause through itself or by accident.

The text of the proposition suggests that degree of reality, or being, is proportionate to the number of attributes that can belong to a thing. The phrase, ‘[degree of] reality, or being’ is the key to understanding Spinoza’s meaning. In Spinoza’s entire corpus outside of the *Ethics*, the phrase occurs only in the *PPC*, in the context of “axioms taken from Descartes”—specifically, from “the end of the Replies to the Second Objections.”¹² There, in *PPC* A4, Spinoza claims that, for Descartes, “There are different degrees of reality, *or* being: for a substance has more reality than an accident or mode, and the infinite substance more than a finite.”

It is not clear, however, what this licenses us to say it means for Spinoza to speak of degrees of reality, or being, in the *Ethics*. It would be premature to assert that Spinoza is simply a Cartesian on this point, and so it is not at all clear what this proposition means. Fortunately, Spinoza seems to have recognized that he needs to say more. In the scholium following 1P10, he provides the following argument:

From these propositions it is evident that although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still cannot infer from that that they constitute two beings, *or* two different substances. For it is of the nature of a substance that each of its attributes is conceived through itself, since all the attributes it has have always been in it together, and one could not be produced by another, but each expresses the reality, *or* being of substance.

This argument provides follow-up implications that Spinoza thinks 1P9 and 1P10 have with respect to the nature of Attributes and Substance.¹³ The main point seems to be that conceptual distinctness does not imply substantial (or ontological) distinctness,

12. *PPC*, Part I, Prop. 4, scholium.

13. Incidentally, it is curious that Spinoza has chosen not to label the conclusion of this argument a corollary of 1P10, with 1P9 explicitly listed as part of the demonstration. One possible explanation for this is that, given the tendentious nature of the claim, a scholium is needed to say more clearly what is going on in this argument. However, this could have been attached as a scholium to the corollary, just as Spinoza does many times later on.

because conceptual distinctness only requires that each Attribute be conceived by its own lights. Spinoza takes it to follow that conceiving an Attribute by its own lights does not imply that the thing conceived under that Attribute is inconceivable under any other Attributes. On the contrary, the number of Attributes, by 1P9, indicates how *real* a thing is, and furthermore, the kind of attributes indicates the kind of *thing* (i.e., its nature). Spinoza affirms this again in the second note following Lemma 1 before the demonstration of P7 in the PPC:

We are not speaking here about beauty and the other ‘perfections’ which men have wished, in their superstition and ignorance, to call perfections. By perfection I understand only reality, *or* being. E.g., I perceive that more reality is contained in substance than in modes, *or* accidents. Hence I understand clearly that it contains a more necessary and perfect existence than accidents do, as is plain enough from A4 and A6.

This is a helpful instance because in it Spinoza identifies perfection and ‘reality, *or* being’.

Indeed, Spinoza (or his interlocutor) sometimes uses the following phrases: ‘reality or Being’¹⁴, ‘reality or perfection’¹⁵, ‘essence or perfection’¹⁶, ‘virtue or perfection’¹⁷, ‘essence or being’, ‘essence, or form’¹⁸, ‘essence, or nature’¹⁹, ‘[God’s] essence or supreme perfection’²⁰, ‘particular affirmative essence, or from a true and legitimate definition.’²¹ The upshot of this is that the identification of reality or being with essence, perfection, virtue, form, nature, and so on, allows Spinoza to make key

14. Letter 9

15. 2P1s, 2p43s, 2p48s, II.A.(iii).

16. Only used by Blijenberg, Letter 20.

17. *TP*, *Chap. II*, 7.

18. 4pref.

19. 3P56, 4D8, 4P19, 4P33, 4P61.

20. *CM II. Ch. III, Of God’s Immensity*.

21. *TdIE 93*.

distinctions between the nature of God, or Substance, and the nature of particular things.

5.2.2 God's Nature and Causal Power

C2 and C3 are purported to follow from 1P16, which Spinoza thinks must be clear if we understand that “the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it.” If we understand the definition of God (1D6), then we understand that God has infinitely many attributes, and thus infinitely many things follow in infinitely many modes. It is, however, not immediately clear how the corollaries follow.

Wolfson provides the following account which helps shed light on Spinoza's motives:²²

Probably the mediaevals themselves would subscribe to Spinoza's next statement that ‘God is cause through himself (*per se* essentially), and not through that which is accidental (*per accidens*).’ But still, since the world of which they maintain God is the cause is unlike God in nature, God being immaterial and the world being material, then, despite their protestations, God must be considered not as an essential cause but as an accidental cause, for one of the meanings of essential cause, and the one which Spinoza has found in Bergersdijk and Heereboord, is that the cause produces something of its own kind. When the cause produces something which is not of its own kind, it is called accidental cause.²³

On Wolfson's interpretation, then, Spinoza's agreement with medieval conceptions of God's causal power ultimately leads to an argument against their conception of God as transcendent and immaterial. Indeed, this is precisely what Spinoza argues in C5 and C8. Taken together, these three conclusions constitute part of a *reductio ad*

²² Here, he also notes the source of Spinoza's thinking on these matters in Bergersdijk and Heereboord, as Curley noted above for the list of God's propria in the *KV*.

²³ Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, 307.

absurdum of a certain conception of God, with rather iconoclastic results. Wolfson suggests just such an argument, in which “since according to the mediaevals the world which was produced by God is not of His kind, for God is immaterial and the world is material, God then is only an accidental cause.”²⁴ Spinoza rejects this conclusion as absurd, and as a result must argue for God’s immanence in Nature (C5) and, thus, for God’s being extended (C8). These arguments are presented independently, but rest ultimately on Spinoza’s rejection of putative accidental causation on God’s part, were God an immaterial, transcendent being.

Regarding C3, Wolfson tells us,

Similarly the mediaevals would whole-heartedly subscribe to Spinoza’s fourth characterization of divine causality contained in his declaration that ‘God is absolutely the first cause.’ In fact, God has been called the first cause ever since Aristotle. But behind this statement of Spinoza’s that God is the ‘absolutely’ first cause there is an unexpressed argument that the mediaevals could not with full right call their God an absolutely first cause. In the source used by Spinoza, a distinction is made between two kinds of first causes. One is called the absolutely first cause (*causa absolute prima*) and the other is called a first cause in its own kind (*causa prima suo genere*).²⁵

Thus, the emphasis in Spinoza’s claim is on ‘*absolutely*’, rather than on the fact that God is the first cause. As Wolfson reminds us, the latter claim is almost trivially accepted in the history of philosophy. Spinoza’s claim in this corollary then stands as an affirmation of one horn of a dilemma: God is *causa absolute prima* not merely *causa prima suo genere*. Wolfson’s suggestion that this is a veiled argument against the medieval conception of God may be an accurate reflection of Spinoza’s motive, but this claim also has a straightforward implication for his metaphysics. Just as with the argument for C2, Spinoza’s argument here ends up functioning as a *reductio*

24. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, 307.

25. *Ibid.*, 307–308.

ad absurdum of alternative conceptions of God. If God is absolutely the first cause, then God must be the first cause of all things, and so all things must agree with God in nature. Consequently, if God does not agree with all things in nature, then God cannot be absolutely the first cause.

C7 directly pertains to the very important distinction between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*, which Spinoza introduces in the scholium of 1P29, telling us:

Before I proceed further, I wish to explain here—or rather to advise [the reader]—what we must understand by *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. For from the preceding I think it is already established that by *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e. (by P14C1 and P17C2), God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause. But by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any of God’s attributes, i.e., all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.

It follows from this that C7 establishes that no actual intellection occurs in God insofar as he is a free cause. Thus, this claim appears to be a way to establish the fact that even if God as free cause has the power of thinking, insofar as Thought is an attribute of God (see 2P1), *actually existing* thoughts are modes, and so neither human beings, with their finite intellects, nor infinite intellects, can have thoughts which are freely caused.²⁶

The propositions C8, C9 and C10 assert further implications for the concept of God that undergird Spinoza’s redefinition. God is a thinking-extended unique unity. This

26. Curley argues that 1P29 establishes that, properly speaking, God is only *Natura naturans* not *Natura naturata*. I will not endeavour to argue for or against this view here, but I will note that Spinoza’s use of *quatenus* suggests that he is distinguishing a difference in aspect, rather than a difference in essence. Cf. his discussion of water insofar [*quatenus*] as it is substance as opposed to water insofar as it is water in 1P8 scholium.

effectively emphasizes the monistic aspect of Spinoza's Nature, despite its multi-faceted Attributes.²⁷

C10 is an affirmation that ideas are directly efficiently caused only by God as thinking, rather than by the objects that the ideas are of. This is tantamount to a rejection of trans-attribute causation (e.g., from bodies to ideas), which avoids at least part of the mind-body problem facing Descartes, since if we accept this proposition, there is no puzzle about how bodies could cause thinking (i.e., of them): they plainly cannot. Thus, Spinoza is rejecting the view which says that external objects, namely, physical bodies, efficiently cause us to perceive them, in favour of an immanent efficient causal picture in which our perceptions and thoughts are produced by Thought alone, despite having as objects things which appear to be causes of their ideas.

To summarize all of this, it seems that Spinoza's aim is to have his readers acquire a conception of God according to which God retains his status as the unique first cause through himself, prompted only by the perfection of his nature, with an eternally true existence and essence. But he adds to this that God is an immanent cause of all things, is extended, is the cause of the formal being of ideas only insofar as he is considered as thinking, and finally, that God's love of men and the Mind's intellectual love of God just are the same thing. These changes are radical, and insofar as they constitute metaphysical claims, they are critical for the rest of Spinoza's project.

5.3 Body and Mind

The next set of conclusions occurs after 2P13, where Spinoza introduces the infamous 'physical digression' into the part of the *Ethics* concerning the human mind. The

27. I leave aside the difficult question of what to do with the infinity of other attributes that seem to follow from God's absolutely infinite Nature.

corollary of the first proposition of *Ethics III* is included here for the same reason 2P2, 2P4 and 2P5 were included in the list above. These conclusions are:

- C11: 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. (2L3c)
- C12: Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct ideas. (2P36)
- C13: Knowledge of the second and third kinds, and not of the first kind, teaches us to distinguish the true from the false. (2P42)
- C14: From this it follows that it depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent, both in respect to the past and in respect to the future. (2P44c1)
- C15: The will and the intellect are one and the same. (2P49c)
- C16: From this it follows that the Mind is more liable to passions the more it has inadequate ideas, and conversely, is more active the more it has adequate ideas. (3P1c)

This set of claims begins with a corollary of a lemma concerning bodies, but includes four of the most important epistemic claims in Spinoza's philosophy. The final claim, a corollary of 3P1 concerns the relationship between the adequacy of ideas in the mind and its activity or passivity. What all of these propositions have in common is that they all involve the concept of necessity in key ways. Thus, these propositions take the efficient-causal picture of God or Nature and develop its implications for knowledge and volition.

C11 might have been better categorized as an axiom. Spinoza seems to recognize this when he notes that while it follows from 2L3, it is also self-evident. The claim is essentially a restatement of Descartes' first law of nature, according to which, "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.”²⁸ While Spinoza does not cite this principle explicitly, it seems that by signaling his endorsement of it in the context of a discussion of the human mind, there is an implicit rejection of the Cartesian substantial distinction between matter and mind. That is, in adopting a principle of necessary motion without restriction, Spinoza can hold that the mind is not exempt from the common order of nature.

To see that this is so, we need only look at the remaining conclusions. In C12, we see Spinoza affirm that all ideas in the human mind, whether adequate or inadequate, are necessary. The proof of this rests ultimately on a denial of the reality of inadequate ideas, at least insofar as they are considered as parts of nature. Thus, whether one is reasoning clearly, or reacting in a confused manner, there is no escape from the necessity of nature.

The denial of the inadequacy of ideas in nature seems to be at work again in C13, which, like C11, Spinoza also claims is self-evident. It does seem quite clear that if there are no inadequate ideas in nature, then the first kind of knowledge can't teach us how to distinguish the true from the false, because, as Spinoza explains in 2p40s2, it *only* concerns inadequate ideas.

C14 relegates contingency to the imagination, which is the purview of the first kind of knowledge. Thus, this conclusion emphasizes that our beliefs in the contingency of the past and future are, ultimately, confused. Things as they really were, and really will be, are as necessary as things are now.

The final conclusion of *Ethics II*, C15, equates Will with Intellect, marking a clear distinction between Spinoza and Descartes. Recall that in Chapter 2 we considered that Spinoza had been exhorted by Oldenburg to explain what errors he finds in Bacon

28. Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*, 140.

and Descartes. Spinoza had claimed that “they never grasped the true cause of error.” In the *Ethics*, Spinoza demonstrates in geometric order what he only alluded to in his early conversation with Oldenburg. Where Descartes holds that “the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect, and this is the cause of error,”²⁹ Spinoza explains in the scholium immediately following 2P49c that “we have removed what is commonly maintained to be the cause of error. Moreover, we have shown above that falsity consists only in the privation that mutilated and confused ideas involve.”³⁰ Spinoza seems keenly aware that the Cartesian will object to his view, because he considers a number of objections to his view. “The first of these is that they think it clear that the will extends more widely than the intellect, and so is different from the intellect.”³¹ His response to this objection is categorical: “I grant that the will extends more widely than the intellect, if by intellect they understand only clear and distinct ideas. But I deny that the will extends more widely than perceptions, or the faculty of conceiving.”³² Thus, Spinoza’s equation of the will and the intellect is intended also to equate the intellect with both conceptions and perceptions, so that in either case, there is simply an idea of something which is either adequate or inadequate, and thus there is no room for the will to extend further than this.

Finally, in C16, Spinoza establishes a direct connection between inadequate ideas and passions, and adequate ideas and actions. Since Spinoza has effectively removed the need for a separate faculty of the will in C15, he cannot use such a faculty to introduce a distinction between passion and action. His solution is to make passivity and activity a function of the adequacy of the ideas, which are in either case fully

29. Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*, 204.

30. 2P49s, (II/131/5-15)

31. (II/132/20-25), III.A.(i)

32. (II/133/20-30)

determined. This is why in 3P1, Spinoza argues that “our Mind (by D2), insofar as it has adequate ideas, necessarily does certain things [acts]”, and “insofar as the Mind has inadequate ideas, it necessarily undergoes certain things.” Here, again, the necessity of nature seems to have determined the way in which Spinoza must adapt his conceptual scheme.

5.4 How Not to Hate

In the scholium of 2P49³³ Spinoza claims that “this doctrine contributes to social life, insofar as it teaches us to hate no one, to disesteem no one, to mock no one, to be angry at no one, to envy no one.”³⁴ In this section I aim to demonstrate just how important this aim is for Spinoza. Valtteri Viljanen notes that “Spinoza’s masterpiece is a work with a definite ethical aim: building on a sound ontology, it wants to show us the true nature of our emotions, through the mastering of which we can become creatures that use their power to understand.”³⁵ This is almost certainly correct. The propositions below expose this aspect of Spinoza’s thinking clearly. There is still the nagging question of how it is possible for any individual (person or thing) to *actually* master its emotions. The same geometric necessity which generates the propositions that show us how Hate is generated, maintained, and destroyed, also threatens to make its mastery nothing more than a dream, even for the best of us. There may be no full solution to this. Let us now investigate whether this is so.

33. This scholium really ought to have been an appendix. It functions in exactly the same way as the appendices of other parts of the *Ethics*. This is one of the many structural parts of the *Ethics* that fails to live up to the high praise the whole receives. It is unclear whether this is a fault of Spinoza or a fault of the editors. The content is, I think, relatively unaffected by the structural defect.

34. (II/136/10-15)

35. Viljanen, *Spinoza’s Geometry of Power*, 149.

Above, I suggested that C16 is connected directly to Spinoza's epistemic conclusions. Spinoza's suggestion that the equation of the Will and the Intellect can teach us to hate no one might seem rather optimistic. Yet the conclusions of *Ethics III* suggest that Spinoza takes the task of teaching us how not to hate very seriously:

C17: We cannot hate a thing we pity from the fact that its suffering affects us with Sadness. (3P27c2)

C18: Therefore, if the lover has found that one of those circumstances is lacking, he will be saddened. (3P36c)

C19: If someone begins to hate a thing he has loved, so that the Love is completely destroyed, then (from an equal cause) he will have a greater hate for it than if he had never loved it, and this hate will be the greater as the Love before was greater. (3P38)

C20: He who imagines one he loves to be affected with hate toward him will be tormented by Love and Hate together. For insofar as he imagines that [the one he loves] hates him, he is determined to hate [that person] in return (by P40). But (by hypothesis) he nevertheless loves him. So he will be tormented by Love and Hate together. (3P40c1)

C21: He who imagines he is loved by one he hates will be torn by Hate and Love together. This is demonstrated in the same way as P40C1. (3P41c)

C22: If someone imagines that someone like himself is affected with Hate toward a thing like himself which he loves, he will hate that [person]. (3P45)

C23: If someone has been affected with Joy or Sadness by someone of a class, or nation, different from his own, and this Joy or Sadness is accompanied by the idea of that person as its cause, under the universal name of the class or nation, he will love or hate, not only that person, but everyone of the same class or nation. (3P46)

C24: Anything whatever can be the accidental cause of Hope or Fear. (3P50)

C25: But perhaps this doubt remains—that not infrequently we admire and venerate men's virtues. To remove this scruple, I shall add the following Corollary.

Cor.: No one envies another's virtue unless he is an equal. (3P55sc)³⁶

C26: We are acted on, insofar as we are a part of Nature, which cannot be conceived through itself, without the others. (4P2)

All of these claims are descriptive. They concern hypothetical conditions under which Hate in various forms will or will not occur.

The first of these propositions draws out an implication of 3P23, which says that we will feel joy if we imagine something we hate as affected by Sadness. C17 argues that the imitation of the affects established by 3P27 which produces Pity in us when we see someone like us affected by Sadness cannot occur simultaneously with Hate because that would require Joy caused by that Sadness, but Pity is Sadness and so if we feel Pity, we cannot be rejoicing in the Sadness of another. I have suggested that one of Spinoza's chief aims is to teach us how not to hate. C17 provides us with a mechanism to remove Hate by producing Pity instead. The two affects seem similar enough, since they both involve perceiving Sadness in another. The difference would have to be either that we perceive the other as like ourselves or not, or that we feel either Joy or Sadness when we imagine their Sadness. We can feel Hate for a thing like us (see the demonstration of 3P27), but the scholium of 3P23 argues that insofar as a thing is like ourselves, we will feel conflicted about this. Thus, Spinoza has honed in on what he takes to be a rather useful fact about human psychology—if we can empathize with others, it is harder to hate them.

It is not immediately clear from the explicit content of C18 alone, but taken together, in C18 and C19 Spinoza addresses a source of Hate for things we once loved. This is very important, for if we are to vanquish hatred, we ought to understand its

36. Here, 'sc' refers to the corollary following the scholium of 3P55. Such idiosyncratic short-forms are sometimes necessary because there are cases where there is a corollary both prior to and following a scholium or other sub-element under the same proposition, but neither are officially numbered.

strongest forms and causes. In C18, Spinoza establishes a major source of sadness, which can arise from a major source of joy (i.e., love for another). This sadness arises because much of the joy we experience for others is, according to 3P36, *accidental*. Despite this, we still want the things that caused it. Thus, straightforwardly, if it comes to pass that the circumstances change so that the accidents we perceived together with a source of Joy are lacking, we will feel sadness (just as we do when we feel the loss of a thing we love). This is dangerous.

Spinoza expends a great deal of time on related affects of Envy and Jealousy, and seems to be keenly aware of how common and destructive these passions are. He also argues that “If we imagine that a thing which usually affects us with an affect of Sadness is like another which usually affects us with an equally great affect of Joy, we shall hate it and at the same time love it.”³⁷ This vacillation, and its concomitant confusion, combined with the desire to preserve things we love, and destroy things we hate, puts us in an exceedingly poor state. Worse, 3P38 demonstrates that if Hate which arises toward a thing once loved vanquishes that Love, then the strength of the Hate is proportionate to the Love, which, if great, makes it all the more difficult to remove once it occurs.

The importance of this interpersonal vacillation of Love and Hate is emphasized more strongly in the next two conclusions, C20 and C21. These corollaries are a converse pair. C20 concerns the effect of imagining that one is hated by a loved one. Likewise, C21 concerns the effect of imagining that one is loved by one whom one hates. In both cases, the effect is to be torn by Hate and Love together. We have just seen why this is so dangerous, and Spinoza appears to have targeted this explicitly.

These two propositions illustrate the immense difficulty of attempting to modulate

37. 3P17.

the Hate of others. In the first two conclusions we considered in this section, Spinoza suggests that Pity is a powerful modulator of Hatred because if we can feel Pity for someone, we feel Sadness concerning their Sadness, and therefore cannot feel Joy, and therefore cannot hate them (because this would cause us to rejoice at their Sadness). Yet, the conclusions Spinoza reaches concerning the interplay between Love and Hate suggest that in many cases where Hatred arises in the presence of Love, it may be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to produce Pity. Why? Because in these cases, the vacillation between Love and Hate, or the occurrence of Love and Hate together rules out a straightforward feeling of Sadness at the other's Sadness. Rather, now we feel Joy accompanied by the idea of another as its cause, now we feel Joy accompanied by the idea of the Sadness of another. In neither case is it very easy to see how we could bring it about that we move from feeling Joy to feeling Sadness at the Sadness of the other.

The next two conclusions also form a diad. C22 concerns the Hate we have when imagining someone like ourselves hate something we love. C23 concerns the Hate or Love we will have when imagining someone different from ourselves as the cause of our Joy or Sadness. Here, Spinoza interestingly argues that the difference between in-group and out-group Hate is that we attribute causality (and therefore responsibility, and therefore worthiness for our Hate) in the in-group to the individual person, but in the out-group we attribute that same causality to general features which we apply to the whole group, thus deeming all members of that group worthy of our Hate. This is a striking conclusion for an Early Modern thinker. Spinoza is, of course, uniquely situated to see such details, in that time period, as a descendant of immigrants, as a Jewish child in an overwhelmingly Christian society, and as a free-thinker who was cast

out of his original community. The fact that these claims hold the status of conclusions in his *Ethics* tells us that he thinks they are very important. The language is still descriptive, not (at least not clearly) normative. Indeed, Spinoza does not come right out with a judgment about the value of Hate until 4P45, where he baldly asserts that “Hate can never be good.” Still, it is not difficult to see that for Spinoza overcoming Hate, if at all possible, is very important.³⁸

It is at this point that Spinoza’s attention turns slightly, and the final three conclusions of *Ethics III* concern Hope and Fear, and envy of virtue. One really interesting feature of C24 is that it appears to be simply a narrower restatement of 3P15—hence Spinoza claiming that it is demonstrated in the same way as that proposition. 3P15 states that “any thing can be the accidental cause of Joy, Sadness, or Desire.” Since Hope and Fear are species of Joy and Sadness, it seems straightforward enough to claim that these too can be accidentally caused by anything.

Notice that earlier Spinoza had focused on the accidents that may be present or absent in our Love of another, and as such, when lacking, may be causes of Sadness, and therefore Hate. Here, Spinoza seems to be concerned that because Hope and Fear involve loving or hating something, this is yet another source of very strong Hate. Indeed, Spinoza suggests that “we are so constituted by nature that we easily believe the things we hope for, but believe only with difficulty those we fear... This is the source of the Superstitions by which men are everywhere troubled.”³⁹ Hope and Fear in particular present a unique problem for human beings if we want to attempt to conquer Hate, because they involve deep uncertainty and strong desires. In 3P18s2, which Spinoza tells us to consult on this matter, he claims that if this uncertainty is

38. See also especially C34 and C57.

39. 3P50s, II/178/5-10)

removed, Fear becomes Despair.

Hope and Fear concern Spinoza as far back as the *KV*, where he argues that “as for Hope, Fear, Confidence, Despair, and Jealousy, it is certain that they arise from an incorrect opinion. For as we have already proven, all things have their necessary causes and must happen as they do happen.”⁴⁰ The connection between Spinoza’s necessitarian conviction and his causal-naturalistic approach to human affects is laid bare here.

In this chapter I have suggested that a careful investigation into Spinoza’s conclusions in the first two parts of the *Ethics* shows that he aims to reinforce a necessitarian view of Nature, and therefore of human beings as parts of that Nature. In *Ethics III*, we have arrived at further evidence for this reading, which is supported by earlier texts. In the *KV*, however, Spinoza appears particularly concerned about reconciling his necessitarian metaphysics with his ethical aims. He notes,

...though Confidence and Despair seem to have a place in the inviolable order and series of causes (for there everything is inviolable and unalterable), nevertheless when we examine the matter rightly, we find that is far from being the truth. For Confidence and Despair never exist unless Hope and Fear have previously existed (for they have their being from them).⁴¹

It is not at all clear what the young Spinoza means when he claims it is ‘far from being the truth’ that Confidence and Despair have a place in the inviolable order and series of causes. Even here, Spinoza admits that he conceives *everything* in that order as ‘inviolable and unalterable’, so if anyone ever has Confidence or Despair, it is difficult to see how they would not be part of the order and series of causes (i.e., in Nature). In the *KV* the solution seems to be to treat Despair, and passions more

40. (I/72/9-15)

41. (I/72/15-20)

generally, as in some sense not real, since it arises only from images of things, rather than from our nature alone.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza reaffirms this in a number of places, but perhaps most clearly, in 4P47s⁴²: “Confidence and Despair, Gladness and Remorse are signs of a mind lacking in power. For though Confidence and Gladness are affects of Joy, they still presuppose that a Sadness has preceded them, viz. Hope and Fear.” Thus, Sadness produces a lessening of reality for the sad person, so that even if it results in Joy, which is itself real, because that Joy must always come from the Sadness of Hope and Fear, it nevertheless involves a component which does not actually exist. This Joy counterintuitively indicates a lack of power. This indication can only be produced by a comparison of an imagined degree of power with either another imagined degree of power (such as the power one had before Sadness produced a transition to a lower degree) or the actual degree of power, rather than simply affirming the actual degree of power constituted by the Joy.

If a person simply affirms his or her actual degree of power, there is no Confidence, because there is no Hope or Fear. That is why Spinoza concludes in 4P47s that “the more we strive to live according to the guidance of reason, the more we strive to depend less on Hope, to free ourselves from Fear, to conquer fortune as much as we can, and to direct our actions by the certain counsel of reason.” Yet, the difficulty of reconciling ethical aims with the fact of necessity persists. I will consider this in greater detail in the final chapter of this dissertation. For now, let us finish this section with the analysis of the final conclusion of *Ethics III* and the first of *Ethics IV*.

The final conclusion of *Ethics III*, C25, is a corollary Spinoza adds following the scholium to 3P55, apparently solely for the purpose of defending his claim that we

42. The scholium of C35.

are naturally inclined to Hate and Envy. An objection to this might be that we often admire or venerate other people's virtues. In responding to this with a corollary that "no one envies another's virtue unless he is an equal," Spinoza is implying that such admiration and veneration require imagining that the admired or venerated thing is *not* like ourselves, or equal to ourselves in power. We do not admire or venerate our equals for their virtues if we lack them, we envy them! We are "saddened by [our] equals' virtue,"⁴³ at least insofar as we consider this virtue to exceed our own. This Sadness is the source of Hate or Envy.

Spinoza explains further that "we venerate a man because we wonder at his prudence, strength of character, etc., that happens (as is evident from the proposition itself) because we imagine these virtues to be peculiarly in him, and not as common to our nature. Therefore, we shall not envy him these virtues any more than we envy trees their height, or lions their strength."⁴⁴ This remarkable passage hints at another potential mechanism for quelling Hate. Just as Pity renders Hate impossible, so too does imagining someone's features as peculiar to that person, rather than common to our Nature, render Envy (which *is* Hatred itself, by 3P24S) impossible. And just as it is difficult to produce Pity in those who are torn between Love and Hate, it must be difficult to convince someone that another's virtues are not common, especially if by appearance alone, the two appear to both be of the same species. Yet, since we do this when we wonder at another, as Spinoza admits, it seems that there may be a way to use this to our advantage in removing Hate.

Finally, let us consider the second proposition of *Ethics IV*, which states that "we are acted on, insofar as we are a part of Nature, which cannot be conceived through

43. II/183/8-10. 3P55s.

44. (II/184/10-15)

itself, without the others.” This is a bald assertion of humanity’s naturalness, and our necessary dependence on the rest of Nature. What this leaves open, however, is the degree to which we can be conceived without the rest of Nature, i.e., through ourselves alone. Spinoza has chosen to leave this statement as a final conclusion, not employed explicitly elsewhere, which suggests that he intends to emphasize it. Shortly after this, Spinoza affirms that “it is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.”⁴⁵ This proposition closes the door on our being able to avoid being acted on. We must, necessarily, be acted on. The implications of this for Spinoza’s apparent ethical aims concerning Hate are not clear, but the prospects seem rather dim. If we are always acted on, how could we ever hope to avoid our own Hate, and transform the Hate of others? The threat of Despair looms, but the question remains: to what extent can we be considered to be actors at all? This is addressed in *Ethics IV* and *V*.

5.5 Action and Freedom

In the previous section, we saw that Spinoza is intensely focused on Hate in *Ethics III*. Our investigation into the doctrines of that part suggests that Spinoza is aware of the difficulties regarding the removal of particularly entrenched forms of Hate (especially Envy, which for Spinoza is rooted in our very nature). In *Ethics IV*, Spinoza’s conclusions suggest that he is searching for a certain method for creating, aiding, restraining, or removing various affects. Given the primacy of Hate in his thinking, it is presumably at the forefront of his mind here as well.

45. 4P4, II/212/25-30.

Ethics IV contains twenty-nine propositions that do not feature explicitly in further arguments in the text—the largest set out of the five parts. Along with the first major conclusion of *Ethics V*, I list these propositions exhaustively below. I have divided them into batches of sufficient relevance in order to make the remainder of this chapter more manageable.

5.5.1 Aid and Restraint

The first set of propositions in this section concern aiding or restraining affects in general.

- C27: An affect, insofar as it is related to the Mind, can neither be restrained nor taken away except by the idea of an opposite affection of the Body stronger than the affection through which it is acted on. (4P7c)
- C28: An affect toward a contingent thing which we know does not exist in the present is milder, other things equal, than an affect toward a past thing. (4P13)
- C29: No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered as an affect. (4P14)
- C30: Insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to agree in nature. (4P32)
- C31: When each man most seeks his own advantage for himself, then men are most useful to one another. (4P35c2)
- C32: Things which are of assistance to the common Society of men, or which bring it about that men live harmoniously, are useful; those, on the other hand, are evil which bring discord to the State. (4P40)

C27 establishes the general mechanism for the restraint or removal of affects, *viz.* by being affected by a stronger, contrary affect. This is an exceedingly important proposition, especially in light of the importance of the restraint or removal of Hate discussed in the previous section. The potential checks on Hate that Spinoza proposes,

Pity and (perhaps) Wonder, or some other way of imagining others as different from ourselves, function precisely because they fall under this general principle of being, or involving, contrary affects. Now, we see that this is not enough. The contrary affects must also be *stronger* than the affect they are intended to restrain or remove.

It is fitting, then, that C28 settles one condition under which affects are weaker or stronger than others. Spinoza claims that a known non-existent present thing produces a weaker affect than a past thing. The crux of this claim is that the image of a contingent thing we know not to exist now requires also imagining reasons why it does not exist, whereas the recollection of a past thing, Spinoza thinks, does not involve these images that would rule out its existence, and so we experience the affects it generates as if it were present. Spinoza's demonstration does not invoke it, but the corollary of the previous proposition, 4P12c, asserts that known non-existent things we imagine produce milder affects than if we imagine them as present. Thus, the strength of affects is in part a function of whether we imagine the causes as present or not (and also as contingent or not). It is not difficult to see that this may play a role in showing us how to aid or restrain particular affects, by working out means to imagine them either as present or not, or as contingent or necessary.

One way that affects cannot be restrained, however, is by the epistemic content of true knowledge of good and evil. In C29, Spinoza shows us that the general rule for the restraint or removal of affects means that true knowledge of good and evil *can* only restrain affects insofar as this knowledge itself *is considered as* an affect. In other words, it is not enough to know what is good or bad for you; you would have to *feel* it (and perhaps also know that you feel it), in such a way that what you feel is,

according to C27, an affect of a contrary and stronger kind.⁴⁶

The next three doctrines concern various aspects of social interaction. C30 establishes that passions (i.e., passive affects) are the source of disagreement in nature. This is *deep* disagreement, not merely apparent disagreement. Interestingly, for the third time in our list, this is a claim which Spinoza demonstrates, yet also claims “This matter is also evident through itself.”⁴⁷

The argument goes like this: the passions are affects produced by external things affecting us, and as such are negations of our power. Agreement in nature (i.e., a shared mode of being) must be in some way agreement in power (i.e., if two beings agree in nature, insofar as they are both active, their powers agree and combine with, rather than negate, one another). So, even if we agree with others in terms of our common power(s), we cannot agree with them insofar as these powers are negated, and so we cannot agree *in passions*.

This raises a compelling point of support for what Spinoza has already concluded concerning Pity, *viz.* that because Pity is a passion, even though it is feeling Sadness at the Sadness of another, it does not really involve agreeing with the other in Nature, because the Sadness is, ultimately, mere negation. This is why Pity (and, as a number of the items later on in our list illustrate, any other sad passion) would be useless under the guidance of reason.

46. Both Hobbes (Hobbes et al., *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 75) and Bacon (Bacon, *The works of Francis Bacon*, 79) had famously espoused claims to the effect that knowledge is power (*‘scientia potentia est’* or *‘scientia potestas est’*). Spinoza’s intent to distinguish himself from Bacon and Hobbes may be at work here, since his claim amounts to: knowledge alone is not power, or knowledge is power (if it is also an affect of a contrary and stronger kind). It is important that for Spinoza there cannot be knowledge alone. Knowledge, or true ideas, have corresponding bodies, and they also always involve desire. The power of knowledge, then cannot come from its simply being true, but from the way in which ideas and corresponding bodies strive to persevere in being. I discuss this further in section 5.5.2.

47. (4P32s, II/230/29).

C30 establishes the way in which people do not agree in nature. It is fitting, then, that C31 establishes the way in which people are most useful to one another, i.e., when each one seeks one's own advantage. This seeking of one's own advantage is connected to living according to the guidance of reason. The utility of this is connected to the aid provided to the power of acting. The more each of us seeks to aid our power of acting, the more we agree in nature. And when we agree in nature, we are most useful to one another.

Consequently, Spinoza is able to also conclude in C32 that utility tracks aid to society in general (or harmony), because "Society has the power to prescribe a common rule of life, to make laws, and to maintain them—not by reason, which cannot restrain the affects (by 4P17S), but by threats."⁴⁸ This isn't, of course, a Utopia, but Spinoza's point is that by applying a common rule of life, and restraining affects by force, a society is a useful thing. So, when members of a society do things which are of assistance to it, they are in a sense aiding the ability of everyone to live according to the guidance of reason. On Spinoza's view, then, Society, or the State, by virtue of the imposition of common rules, has the power to help us regulate the affects and therefore to aid us, and conversely, when we act in ways that aid the harmony of Society, we are aiding ourselves. This may be thought of as a social correlate for the methodological principle (M3): to avoid wearying the mind with useless things, we must follow certain rules, and sometimes these rules will be applicable and enforceable interpersonally.

48. 4P37s2. II/238/10-15.

5.5.2 Excesses and Virtues, Good and Evil

Near the mid-point of *Ethics IV*, there is a series of propositions that establish whether or not specific affects can be excessive, or virtues, or arise from reason, or are good or evil. They are as follows:

- C33: Cheerfulness cannot be excessive, but is always good; Melancholy, on the other hand, is always evil. (4P42)
- C34: Whatever we want because we have been affected with hate is dishonorable; and [if we live] in a State, it is unjust. This too is evident from IIP39, and from the Definitions of dishonorable and unjust (see P37S). (4P45c2)
- C35: Affects of Hope and Fear cannot be good of themselves. (4P47)
- C36: Affects of Overestimation and Scorn are always evil. (4P48)
- C37: Overestimation easily makes the man who is overestimated proud. (4P49)
- C38: From this it follows that man who lives according to the dictate of reason, strives, as far as he can, not to be touched by pity. (4P50c)
- C39: Favor is not contrary to reason, but can agree with it and arise from it. (4P51)
- C40: Humility is not a virtue, or does not arise from reason. (4P53)
- C41: Repentance is not a virtue, or does not arise from reason; instead, he who repents what he has done is twice wretched, or lacking in power. (4P54)
- C42: Either very great Pride or very great Despondency indicates very great weakness of mind. (4P56)
- C43: From this it follows very clearly that the proud and the despondent are highly liable to affects. (4P56c)
- C44: The proud man loves the presence of parasites, or flatterers, but hates the presence of the noble. (4P57)
- C45: Love of esteem is not contrary to reason, but can arise from it. (4P58)
- C46: A Desire arising from either a Joy or a Sadness related to one, or several, but not to all parts of the Body, has no regard for the advantage of the whole man. (4P60)

C47: From the guidance of reason, we shall want a lesser present evil which is the cause of a greater future good, and pass over a lesser present good which is the cause of a greater future evil. This Corollary stands to P66 as P65C does to P65. (4P66c)

Nearly all of these propositions refer to Affects or properties related to Affects either explicitly in pairs, or in such a way that they can easily be rearranged into pairs.⁴⁹ In order to more clearly break things down, I list these Affects as follows:

- A1. Cheerfulness and Melancholy
- A2. Dishonor and Injustice⁵⁰
- A3. Hope and Fear
- A4. Overestimation and Scorn
- A5. Pride and Despondency
- A6. Humility and Repentance
- A7. Favor and Love of esteem

Cheerfulness and Melancholy are contraries. Spinoza argues that both are Affects, which affect all parts of the body. The former is a Joy, and so “the Body’s power of acting is increased or aided, so that all of its parts maintain the same proportion of motion and rest to one another.”⁵¹ The latter, conversely, “is a Sadness, which, insofar as it is related to the Body, consists in this, that the Body’s power of acting is absolutely diminished or restrained.”⁵² These two Affects appear to be very important primarily because of the absoluteness of their affective activity. A Joy which can never

49. See the Catalog of Passions in LeBuffe, “The Anatomy of the Passions,” 201. It is not my aim to analyze these affects in detail, but only to discern their place in the long list of propositions we have been examining in this chapter.

50. This is not an affect, but Spinoza, I think rightly, seems to think it is closely related to many affects.

51. 4P42d.

52. 4P42d.

be excessive will always be useful, or good. A Sadness which is always evil, it seems, therefore, can never be useful. Thus, given Spinoza's preoccupation with the removal of Hate (and the other sad passions), an Affect which is always good will be something always worth striving for in the preservation of ourselves, and conversely, an Affect which is always bad will be something always worth striving to avoid.

C34 concerns objects of desire which are dishonourable and unjust (in a State), providing a means to adjudicate between desires. This is useful for Spinoza's theory of goodness because it allows him to say that not all desires are in our interest. Without this claim, Spinoza's view could be hijacked by a selfish and unreflective amoralist, who simply asserts that all his desires are good regardless of their causal origin, or their effect on others. After all, Spinoza endorses the claim that "each one, from his own affect, judges, or evaluates, what is good and what is bad, what is better and what is worse, and finally, what is best and what is worst."⁵³ What's more, Spinoza endorses a descriptive cultural relativism in 3DAXXVII.

For not everyone has the same custom and Religion. On the contrary, what among some is holy, among others is unholy; and what among some is honorable, among others is dishonorable. Hence, according as each one has been educated, so he either repents of a deed or exults at being esteemed for it.

C34 is effectively a tempering of the psychological, subject-dependent source of moral judgment by means of socio-political checks and balances, which appear to be licensed so long as the Affects in question are rooted in Hate. Thus, Spinoza can appeal to a certain kind of objective standard of justice. Without this, it would be difficult to see how he could have a viable political theory at all.⁵⁴

53. 3P39s. II/170/20-25.

54. Here, I appeal simply to the role of Justice in political philosophy from Plato to Rawls.

Hope and Fear have been discussed already in our analysis. Here, it suffices to note that Spinoza categorizes them as not good in themselves, because they always involve Sadness. In other discussions of Hope and Fear, Spinoza singles them out as the source of superstition, and notes just how common these affects are.⁵⁵ Superstition is another dangerous force if we are to learn how not to hate, because it “seems to maintain that the good is what brings Sadness, and the evil, what brings Joy.”⁵⁶ The inversion of the value of Sadness and Joy in Superstition is easy to conceive as a source of increased Hate.

Overestimation and Scorn are closely related. They are the same Joy directed toward another, either from thinking more highly, out of Love, or less highly, out of Hate, of the other than is just.⁵⁷ They are both evil for the affected person, but the former also corrupts the person who is overesteemed by leading to Pride in that person.

Spinoza notes that “although Despondency is contrary to Pride, the despondent man is still very near the proud one.”⁵⁸ He goes on to say that “no one is more prone to Envy than the despondent man is.”⁵⁹ Again the importance of this discussion is connected to its role in Hate. Envy is Hate, and Spinoza seems quite concerned to tell us who is most prone to Hate. Both Despondency and Pride are exceptional causes of Hate. Pride, however, is more dangerous, because,

the proud man must be envious (see IIP55S) and hate those most who are most praised for their virtues, that his Hatred of them is not easily conquered by

55. It is worth pondering what Spinoza would have thought about the ‘Hope and Change’ slogan of the United States Presidential campaign of Barack Obama. For more on this and what has happened since then, see Tucker, “Hope, Hate and Indignation: Spinoza on Political Emotion.”

56. 3DAXXXI.

57. See 3P26s, 4AppXXI and XXII.

58. 4P57s. II/252/15-17.

59. 4P57s. II/252/23-24.

Love or benefits (see IIP41S), and that he takes pleasure only in the presence of those who humor his weakness of mind and make a madman of a fool.⁶⁰

The propositions in our list make it clear that, for Spinoza, the Proud and the Despondent share *very great weakness of mind*, that they are both *highly liable to affects*, and that the Proud in particular *hates* the presence of the *Noble*.

It is also telling that Spinoza emphasizes the necessity of these things, and the descriptive nature of his current purpose.

These things follow from this affect as necessarily as it follows from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles. I have already said that I call these, and like affects, evil insofar as I attend only to human advantage. But the laws of nature concern the common order of nature, of which man is a part. I wished to remind my readers of this here, in passing, in case anyone thought my purpose was only to tell about men's vices and their absurd deeds, and not to demonstrate the nature and properties of things.⁶¹

Spinoza explicitly states that his task is to 'demonstrate the nature and properties of things', but his conclusions belie a deep concern with Hate. The reiteration of his commitment to treating the affects mechanistically suggests that he is aware that he may be coming across in a non-neutral manner. Of course, he has not said that these things (Hate, Despondency, Pride) are *not* evil. They are, but only with respect to *human advantage*. This, too, is a matter of necessity.

Humility and Repentance are flatly demoted from the canon of virtues. These affects are, like Hope and Fear, not good in themselves, but potentially useful. They are both Sadness, but unlike the envious or despondent or proud, "those who are subject to these affects can be guided far more easily than others, so that in the end they may live from the guidance of reason, i.e., may be free and enjoy the life of

60. 4P57s. II/252/10-15

61. 4P57s. II/252/27-35.

the blessed.”⁶² Thus, where Pity precludes Hate necessarily, but may be difficult to produce in those with certain forms of Hate, Humility and Repentance do themselves preclude Hate, but may be easier to produce, especially in recalcitrant cases of Hate (such as the Proud or the lover who has come to Hate what was once loved). Spinoza clearly sees the utility of this and even goes so far as to offer what looks like a normative recommendation in their favour.

Because men rarely live from the dictate of reason, these two affects, Humility and Repentance, and in addition, Hope and Fear, bring more advantage than disadvantage. So since men must sin, they ought rather to sin in that direction. If weak-minded men were all equally proud, ashamed of nothing, and afraid of nothing, how could they be united or restrained by any bonds?⁶³

Humility and Despondency in particular are potentially dangerous, but not as dangerous as some other Affects, because they “are very rare. For human nature, considered in itself, strains against them, as far as it can (see 3P13 and 3P54). So those who are believed to be most despondent and humble are usually most ambitious and envious.”⁶⁴ The potential for using the appearance of Humility to disguise ambition and envy makes it particularly troublesome, and the rarity and disagreement with human nature, to which Spinoza points here, suggests that it is not a particularly easy thing to produce in people, so its utility may really be somewhat limited.

I have suggested that Favor and Love of esteem are a pair, despite the fact that the conclusion concerning Favor occurs at 4P51, and the one concerning Love of esteem occurs at 4P58. This geometrical distance notwithstanding, the two propositions are nearly identical. Both Affects are not contrary to reason and can arise from it.

62. 4P54s.

63. 4P54s

64. 3DAXXIX.

Thus, they are both potentially active Joys. Favor is reason-guided Love for the aid of others, and Love of esteem is “a Joy accompanied by the idea of some action of ours which we imagine that others praise.”⁶⁵ Both of these are capable of being either passions or actions because of the requirement of imagining others. This imagining itself cannot be active, but the same Love/Joy can be done without this imagining, or can be conceived without it, and insofar as this is the case, it is active.

The remaining Affect in the list of propositions we have been considering is Pity. We have touched on Pity in some detail above. Here, however, Spinoza introduces an important distinction. Pity may, as I have argued Spinoza holds, be potentially useful for removing Hate, but now Spinoza suggests that it is like Humility and Repentance in that it does not arise from reason, and so cannot be a virtue. What’s more, if we are guided by reason, we *will not* feel it. The scholium following this proposition, presaging the passage from 4P57s I quote above, tells us,

He who rightly knows that all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature, and happen according to the eternal laws and rules of nature, will surely find nothing worthy of Hate, Mockery or Disdain, nor anyone whom he will pity.⁶⁶

Living according to the guidance of reason is the same as knowing the necessity of things. It is only people who live this way who will neither Hate, nor Pity (nor feel Humility or Repentance). Spinoza does seem to want to encourage living according to the guidance of reason, but because claims like this one are descriptive, it is not entirely clear to what degree the demand to live according to the guidance of reason is normative. He does, as I have shown above, think that some Affects make it possible that we *may* live according to the guidance of reason even if we are now not doing so.

65. 3DAXXX.

66. 4P50s.

But this seems to be a rather weak view of the possibility of improving ourselves—it is not clear whether Spinoza can consistently hold a more open view of the possibility of moving an individual from Hate and Sadness to Love and Joy.

There are two final doctrines in this section of *Ethics IV*. The first, C46, concerns Desires arising from Joy or Sadness that do not relate to the entire Body. Such Desires do not have ‘regard for the advantage of the whole man’ for straightforwardly mechanistic reasons: bodies are made of parts, and each of these parts may persevere or be strengthened individually, without necessarily aiding the perseverance or strength of any other part. The significance of this is drawn out in the scholium, where Spinoza notes that “since Joy is generally (by 4P44S) related to one part of the body, for the most part we desire to preserve our being without regard to our health as a whole.”⁶⁷ This proposition is hinting at the threat of excessive desire, which can harm us, even if it is constituted by Joy. In the Appendix of *Ethics IV*, Spinoza refers to the scholium of 4P60 (though only referring to the part of the note that mentions the past and future), but not the proposition itself, to support the claim that “Nevertheless, since things do not act in order to affect us with Joy, and their power of acting is not regulated by our advantage, and finally, since Joy is generally related particularly to one part of the body, most affects of Joy are excessive (unless reason and alertness are present). Hence, the Desires generated by them are also excessive.”⁶⁸ The point seems to be to emphasize our place in Nature, as mere parts, with no more importance than any other parts. As such, it is not to our advantage simply to maximize Joy, because most Joy does not affect, or allow agreement between, our whole bodies, and so will not conduce to our general advantage, which is what we really strive for, *viz.*

67. 4P60s.

68. 4App, XXX. II/275/10-15.

preservation of our being.

Finally, C47 establishes a rule of reason according to which, if we are guided by reason, we will seek greater goods and avoid greater evils, even if these things are in the future, and even if these involve accepting lesser evils or lesser goods in the present. The scholium of this proposition is where Spinoza introduces ‘the free man’, in contrast to a ‘slave’. Spinoza’s language becomes subjunctive in this corollary, with the demonstration beginning, “if the Mind *could* have an adequate knowledge of a future thing, it would be affected toward it with the same affect as it is toward a present one (by 4P62).” It is not clear from Spinoza’s ensuing discussion whether this supposition about the Mind can be satisfied, or, if it can be, to what degree. Things only become more opaque.

5.5.3 The Free Man

The remaining conclusions of *Ethics IV* concern one of the more notorious concepts in Spinoza’s thought: the free man.⁶⁹ The final proposition is the first from *Ethics V*, which I include here, because it hints at one potential source of Spinoza’s optimism about human freedom.

C48: A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death. (4P67)

C49: If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free. (4P68)

C50: The virtue of a free man is seen to be as great in avoiding dangers as in overcoming them. (4P69)

69. Some studies of this include: Garber, “A Free Man Thinks of Nothing Less Than of Death’: Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind,” Kisner, “Reconsidering Spinoza’s Free Man: The Model of Human Nature,” Gannon, ““Knowledge” and “Free Man” in Spinoza’s Ethics,” Yovel and Segal, *Ethica Iv : Spinoza on Reason and the “Free Man” : Papers Presented at the Fourth Jerusalem Conference*.

- C51: In a free man, a timely flight is considered to show as much Tenacity as fighting; or a free man chooses flight with the same Tenacity, or presence of mind, as he chooses a contest. (4P69c)
- C52: A free man who lives among the ignorant strives, as far as he can, to avoid their favors. (4P70)
- C53: Only free men are very thankful to one another. (4P71)
- C54: A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively. (4P72)
- C55: A man who is guided by reason is more free in a state, where he lives according to a common decision, than in solitude, where he obeys only himself. (4P73)
- C56: From this it follows that there is no affect of which we cannot form some clear and distinct concept. For an affect is an idea of an affection of the Body (by Gen. Def. Aff.), which therefore (by P4) must involve some clear and distinct concept. (5P4c)

It is clear that Spinoza's intent in the propositions from 4P67 onward is to elucidate his account of the free man. He introduces the concept in 4P66s, declaring "I wish now to note a few more things concerning the free man's temperament and manner of living."⁷⁰ Thus, these propositions, though they do not feature explicitly in further demonstrations of the *Ethics*, must be important. To summarize more succinctly, the free man's temperament and manner of living is such that he: thinks of nothing less than of death, avoids or overcomes dangers with virtue, similarly chooses to flee or fight with the same Tenacity, strives to avoid favours from the ignorant, is very thankful (to other free men?), always acts honestly, and is more free in a state living according to common decision. This is an admirable list of traits. Yet there is no clear indication that anyone in particular can actually live up to them.

Some scholars have suggested that the 'free man' is simply an exemplar that we imagine as possible in order to guide our behaviour, and others have noted some

70. 4P66s.

incongruities between some of the traits Spinoza describes here and earlier descriptions of what is to our advantage.

Spinoza ends *Ethics IV* by declaring:

A man strong in character considers this most of all, that all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature, and hence, that whatever he thinks is troublesome and evil, and moreover, whatever seems immoral, dreadful, unjust, and dishonorable, arises from the fact that he conceives the things themselves in a way that is disordered, mutilated, and confused. For this reason, he strives most of all to conceive things as they are in themselves, and to remove the obstacles to true knowledge, like Hate, Anger, Envy, Mockery, Pride, and the rest of the things we have noted in the preceding pages. And so, as we have said [II/47/21], he strives, as far as he can, to act well and rejoice.⁷¹

This passage is confusing. Spinoza has expended considerable energy in *Ethics III* and *IV* to declare quite a number of things seemingly genuinely evil, unjust, and dishonourable. He ends this discussion by apparently affirming that, if we are strong in character, we will not think anything is wrong. Of course, there is the obvious sense in which Spinoza can hold that nothing is ever really wrong, *viz.* with respect to Nature itself. And the free man, or the wise, or the strong in character, or one who lives according to the guidance of reason, is supposed to be considering Nature not according to confused or mutilated ideas, but only adequate ones, which, insofar as they are in Nature, will not involve goodness or badness. Yet, Spinoza seems to suggest that even while under the guidance of reason, or while free, a person is not guaranteed to conceive things this way, but rather is just disposed necessarily to strive to do so. But, this should be impossible!

Insofar as a person is free, or acting, or living according to the guidance of reason, that is how things are to be conceived. To fail to do so is precisely to fail to be free,

71. 4P73s. II/265/21-30.

to act, or to live according to the guidance of reason. At least, that is what Spinoza asserts in the propositions concerning the ‘free man’.

One solution to this is to distinguish between the ‘free man’ concept, which seems to indicate (*per impossibile*) an absolutely free man, and the concept Spinoza introduces in this passage, of a man ‘strong in character’ (*fortitudo*). There is some evidence that Spinoza takes strength of character to be a feature of actually existing people, as when he writes to his friend Pieter Balling,

Your last letter, written, if I am not mistaken, on the 26th of last month, has reached me safely. It has caused me no little sadness and anxiety, though that has greatly decreased as I consider the prudence and strength of character with which you are able to scorn the blows of fortune, or rather opinion, when they attack you with their strongest weapons.⁷²

Admittedly, Spinoza may not have intended to accurately reflect the properties his friend actually has, instead offering this description in hopes that it might be or become true, yet it seems that Spinoza does not think strength of character is merely an ideal state.

There are many further puzzling features of Spinoza’s ‘free man’. To focus on just one, consider, 1D7, the definition of ‘free’, “That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone.” This suggests that only God or Nature can be truly free in this sense, because by 4P4, “It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.”⁷³ Thus, it is impossible for anyone to be free in this sense. So, to the extent that the ‘free man’ is possible, it must be a

72. *Ep.* 17. IV/76/5-10.

73. 4P4, II/212/25-30.

different kind of freedom, or, the sense in which the definition of freedom applies must be compatible with, or attenuated by, the necessity of Nature and our status as mere parts.

Spinoza does think that there is a kind of freedom that we can have, and that this freedom is compatible with the necessity of Nature. This freedom, however, comes in degrees, and as I have mentioned several times already, Spinoza does not clearly show that any particular individual person, subject to affects, will be able to come under the guidance of reason and therefore attain a higher degree of freedom. The necessity of Nature seems to require that each of us attains only the freedom that the causal order and history of Nature must cause us to have. By Spinoza's own lights, we cannot simply read about the 'free man' and thereby will ourselves to be more free. We may come to desire not to Hate, but it does not seem to be up to us whether we are affected by Hate in the first place.

There is still hope. The final proposition in this section, C56, hints at Spinoza's intended solution. Recall that he concludes in 5P4c, "there is no affect of which we cannot form some clear and distinct concept." In other words, all affects can be conceived adequately. There is nothing, in principle, preventing us from understanding ourselves adequately. Therefore, the causes of our failures to understand ourselves are contingent.

C56 seems to contradict 4P4c, which asserts that "man is necessarily always subject to passions...follows the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires." From this, it is exceedingly difficult to see how anyone could ever actually move from having a passive Affect to forming an adequate (or clear and distinct) concept of it, and therefore gaining mastery over it, except

insofar as this transition is itself, in any case, determined by the common order of Nature. Those who come to understand themselves and gain freedom, therefore, seem to have been predestined to do so, and those who do not seem to be precluded from using Spinoza's lessons to better themselves. This nihilistic upshot does not seem to have occurred to Spinoza, or, if it did, he seems to have gone to considerable lengths to try to avoid it. This should become most clear in the final section.

5.6 The End of the Ethics

In *Ethics V*, Spinoza's conclusions support the reading I have presented beginning with *Ethics III*, in which Spinoza seems to have targeted Hate (and the possibility of its minimizing, removal, or prevention) as his main ethical subject. Spinoza divides *Ethics V* into two clear parts, the first of which, he says, consists of what he called 'remedies for the Affects' and concerns 'this present life'. The second concerns 'the Mind's duration without the Body'.

5.6.1 Remedies for the Affects, or Concerning this Present Life

C57: Love toward God cannot be turned into hate. (5P18c)

C58: He who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return. (5P19)

C59: This Love toward God cannot be tainted by an affect of Envy or Jealousy: instead, the more men we imagine to be joined to God by the same bond of Love, the more it is encouraged. (5P20)

First, C57 gives us a form of Love that cannot ever become Hate. In the scholium of 5P18, he explains that "insofar as we understand God to be the cause of Sadness, we rejoice." If this proposition were taken out of context, we would be hard-pressed

not to consider it absurd, especially given the resemblance it bears to Panglossian optimism. One way in which Spinoza's view differs from, say, Leibniz's, is that when Spinoza talks about understanding God, he is referring to the necessity of the divine nature.

The propositions we have investigated in this chapter emphasize that Spinoza's God is an efficient, necessary, cause of all things. So, understanding God as cause, or—what is the same—love of God, is identical to simply understanding the causal order of Nature itself. That is what Spinoza means when he asserts at 5P24 that “the more we understand singular things, the more we understand God.” Insofar as we understand particular sad affects, therefore, we understand God. But insofar as we understand God, we cannot be understanding the sad affects as a lack of power, because God cannot not lack power.⁷⁴ The love of God, therefore consists in an adequate knowledge of the necessary causes of things, and this cannot cause (or maintain) Sadness, because this knowledge is Joy.

The followup to this is a denial of God's love for (an individual) man. On its face, C58 is a direct challenge to a theistic conception of God (especially the Christian one). It follows clearly from 5P17c, which states that God does not love or hate anything or anyone, because God isn't subject to Affects or Joy or Sadness. Since God does not love or hate, therefore, if a person were to desire that God love or hate that person, that would be to desire that God not be God, which is, ultimately, absurd. What this proposition also seems to do, however, is remove, or at least deny to those who truly love God, the incentive to do things that we think would please God, or to associate such behaviour with virtue. Thus, this proposition seems to be not only an iconoclastic account of God, but a denial of traditional doctrines of piety.

74. On this, see, perhaps, 1P16, and 1App.

In the scholium of 5P20, Spinoza enumerates five things in which the power of the Mind over the affects consists. They are as follows:

- I In the knowledge itself of the affects;
- II In the fact that it separates the affects from the thought of an external cause, which we imagine confusedly;
- III In the time by which the affections related to things we understand surpass those related to things we conceive confusedly, or in a mutilated way;
- IV In the multiplicity of causes by which affections related to common properties or to God are encouraged;
- V Finally, in the order by which the Mind can order its affects and connect them to one another.

From this it is clear that Spinoza really does think that knowledge of the affects is a kind of power, thus endorsing a version of the Baconian/Hobbesian maxim that knowledge is power. We already saw that Spinoza denies that this knowledge can be powerful simply insofar as it is true, but now Spinoza suggests that because this knowledge is associated with Love of God (and therefore Joy), it is *always* an affect of a contrary kind (to those passions we wish to overpower), and so can overpower the passions. The successful use of this power to overcome sad, bad passions (in ourselves or others) will be a matter of ensuring that we really have such knowledge, rather than merely the appearance of it.⁷⁵

Spinoza still has not quite shown that these claims, especially (V) above, are not merely generally possible for us, *viz.* from our nature, but open possibilities

75. It must be said that ‘ensuring’ suggests more is in an individual’s power than I think Spinoza can be committed to. It is not that any individual can always ensure that they are not self-deceived, or that a phenomenon is genuinely understood. This will often be beyond any individual’s power—especially one already under the sway of very strong passions. But Spinoza can avail himself of the effect of combinatory power, or of cooperation, and socio-political solutions, which can aid us in the management of the passions.

5.6.2 The Mind's Duration Without the Body

After C59, Spinoza turns to a topic that has led some commentators to despair.⁷⁶ Spinoza claims that he intends to discuss the Mind's duration *without* the Body. Spinoza's rejection of Cartesian dualism should make this claim sound fantastical, if not outright contradictory. Yet, eight of the nine remaining conclusions of the *Ethics* specify certain conditions that Spinoza seems to think allow 'the mind' to enjoy eternity.

C60: The more the Mind is capable of understanding things by the third kind of knowledge, the more it desires to understand them by this kind of knowledge. (5P26)

C61: The Striving, or Desire, to know things by the third kind of knowledge cannot arise from the first kind of knowledge, but can indeed arise from the second. (5P28)

C62: Only while the Body endures is the Mind subject to affects which are related to the passions. (5P34)

C63: From this it follows that no Love except intellectual Love is eternal. (5P34c)

C64: From this it follows that insofar as God loves himself, he loves men, and consequently that God's love of men and the Mind's intellectual Love of God are one and the same. (5P36c)

C65: He who has a Body capable of a great many things has a Mind whose greatest part is eternal. (5P39)

C66: From this it follows that the part of the Mind that remains, however great it is, is more perfect than the rest.

For the eternal part of the Mind (by P23 and P29) is the intellect, through which alone we are said to act (by IIP3). But what we have shown to perish is the imagination (by P21), through which alone we are said to be acted on (by IIP3 and the gen. Def. Aff.). So (by P40), the intellect, however extensive it is, is more perfect than the imagination, q.e.d. (5P40c)

76. See, e.g., Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*.

C67: Even if we did not know that our Mind is eternal, we would still regard as of the first importance Morality, Religion, and absolutely all the things we have shown (in Part IV) to be related to Tenacity and Nobility. (5P41)

C68: Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; nor do we enjoy it because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to restrain them. (5P42)

The first two propositions in this list, C60 and C61 take us back to some of the doctrines we already considered in *Ethics II*, in which Spinoza ties a certain kind of epistemology to certain ethical and psychological doctrines.

Now, Spinoza rules out the first kind of knowledge as even a possible source of the third, which itself has a kind of self-propagating power. The second kind of knowledge (reason) has the pragmatic power of potentially leading to the third kind, but it is only the third kind that constitutes the Mind's *summum bonum*.

C62 and C63 establish that the Body is the reason why we experience passions, and Spinoza takes this to license the eternity of what he calls 'intellectual love'.⁷⁷ The earlier task of cataloguing the mechanisms of Hate and other affects relates directly to these propositions. We are bound up in the affects by virtue of being embodied, and we are bound up in ignorance insofar as our minds are tied to these bodies: "the most important thing to note is that we call affects great when we compare the affect of one man with that of another, and see that the same affect troubles one more than another, or when we compare the affects of one and the same man with each other, and find that he is affected, *or* moved, more by one affect than by another."⁷⁸

The eternity of the Mind is determined by the Mind's activity insofar as that

77. For an extensive recent treatment of the Intellectual Love of God (*amor dei intellectualis*) see Nadler, "The Intellectual Love of God." For more on the concept of eternity, see e.g., Nadler, "Eternity and immortality in Spinoza's ethics."

78. 5P20s. II/293/19-24.

activity is itself *in God*, and *conceived through God's* essence.⁷⁹ This activity must be the intellectual love of God. Yet Spinoza appears to tie this activity back to the Body, when he says that the idea “which expresses the essence of the body under a species of eternity” is “a certain mode of thinking, which pertains to the essence of the Mind, and which is necessarily eternal.”⁸⁰ So, the eternal part of the Mind is an idea of the body under a certain species of eternity, but the temporal, affective part of the Mind is also the idea of the very same body, just not under a species of eternity, but, rather, as it actually exists, affected by other bodies (and so, involves ideas not solely of that body alone, but many confused ideas of that body and the external bodies which affect it).

Since Spinoza's ethical aim is to show what the Mind's power over the affects is, and in particular to teach us to hate no one, etc., it is troubling that the possibility of removing or avoiding Hate seems to be tied directly to what first appeared to be a disembodied concept of Mind. This concept, however, is not disembodied. It is, rather, a rarified embodiment, *viz.* a certain species of eternity. This embodiment actually exists just in case we understand by the third kind of knowledge.⁸¹ That is, it obtains just in case we have an adequate idea of something which is grasped immediately.

In 5P29, Spinoza clarifies that any understanding under a species of eternity will not be of the Body's ‘present actual existence’. So it seems that insofar as we understand things in this way, we will not be (and cannot be) understanding things as they are here and now, and “to that extent the Mind does not have the power of conceiving things under a species of eternity.”⁸² Insofar as the Mind does understand itself and

79. 5P23d.

80. 5P23s. II/295/29-30.

81. See: 5P25.

82. 5P29d. II/298/20.

the body under a certain species of eternity, however, it thereby has “knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God and is conceived through God.”⁸³ This knowledge, furthermore, “depends on the Mind, as a formal cause, insofar as the Mind itself is eternal”⁸⁴ because “the Mind conceives nothing under a species of eternity except insofar as it conceives its Body’s essence under a species of eternity.”⁸⁵ Thus, Spinoza ties the third kind of knowledge directly to knowledge of God and, what is the same, knowledge of one’s body insofar as it is eternal, i.e., insofar as it is in itself an eternal part of Nature.

The identification of knowledge of God with knowledge of oneself is very important. As we saw, Spinoza’s earliest doctrines in the *Ethics* focus on God’s necessary, immanent, efficient causation. Bodies as they are in themselves are the product of this immanent cause (mediated by the laws of Nature insofar as it is Extended). These bodies, though they interact with one another, are also conceived and exist eternally as certain and determinate powers of moving and resting (*qua* Extension) and thinking (*qua* Thought). As such, we *are* some of these bodies.

Spinoza claims that “the more each of us is able to achieve [the third kind of knowledge], the more he is conscious of himself and of God, i.e., the more perfect and blessed he is.”⁸⁶ The remaining conclusions in our list make sense of this claim. In C64, Spinoza asserts the identity of God’s love of men, God’s love of himself, and the Mind’s intellectual love of God. Far from being a mystical turn, this is, rather, Spinoza’s clarification of what he has been saying concerning the distinction between a body insofar as it has duration and affects and that same body conceived under

83. 5P30.

84. 5P31

85. 5P31d.

86. 5P31s. II/300.

a certain species of eternity. In the latter aspect, a body is an eternal, unchanging part of God or Nature, which is, ultimately, God or Nature enjoying a certain and determinate power to be a certain way, which if it were alone in the universe would be fully self-conscious and perfect and blessed, because it would constitute the entire power of God or Nature. But since each thing is a mere mode, it constitutes only a limited degree of power and as such is perfect, and blessed, and conscious of itself, only to that extent.

Understood in this way, we can better grasp Spinoza's next two doctrines. C65, which equates the power of the Body with the eternity of the Mind, and C66, which establishes that no matter what degree of power a particular mind has, insofar as this power is eternal, it is therefore more perfect than the parts that are not eternal (i.e., the imagination, memory, and thus all ordinary temporal experiences).

Spinoza concludes the *Ethics* by asserting, first, the importance of Morality, Religion, and everything related to the active affects of Tenacity and Nobility. Finally, Spinoza denies that 'blessedness' (perhaps more clearly thought of as 'enjoying good things') is a reward for abiding by the demands of virtue, but rather is identical with virtue, properly conceived. This proper conception of virtue involves a revision of the causal order. Restraint of lust is not a prerequisite for virtue, but the outcome. It is not difficult to see certain potential implications this final doctrine has for conceptions of morality that depend on the exercise of a free will, and for responsibility.

It is interesting that Spinoza ends his great work with one proposition that almost seems to take back his most iconoclastic conclusions—those that would seem to render the tenets of traditional morality and religion unwise or untenable. We know that Spinoza is aware of this implication, since the scholium of 5P41 begins by noting

that “the usual conviction of the multitude seems to be different. For most people apparently believe that they are free to the extent that they are permitted to yield to their lust, and that they give up their right to the extent that they are bound to live according to the rule of the divine law.”⁸⁷ Spinoza’s reassertion of the value of Morality and Religion appears to be a kind of preemptive strike against a nihilistic impulse that might occur to a reader who reaches the end of the *Ethics* believing that Spinoza has only destroyed these things, rather than redefining, reworking, or otherwise revising them.

Spinoza seems to think that his readers may be driven to a similarly pessimistic or nihilistic reaction after the final proposition as well. This is not surprising, given that both of these propositions effectively invert traditional conceptions of freedom and responsibility and value. Spinoza concludes with an optimistic point, which, though descriptive, seems to carry with it an exhortation:

If the way I have shown to lead to these things now seems very hard, still, it can be found. And of course, what is found so rarely must be hard. For if salvation were at hand, and could be found without great effort, how could nearly everyone neglect it? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.⁸⁸

What is the way Spinoza has shown to lead to these things, *viz.* consciousness of ourselves, and of God, and of things, true peace of mind, never ceasing to be?⁸⁹ The answer cannot be that we finish the *Ethics* and are suddenly able to control ourselves. Whatever the psychotherapeutic powers of Spinoza’s philosophy may be touted to be, they are not magical, and they cannot redetermine the causal course of the universe.

87. 5P41s. II/307/1-10.

88. 5P42s. II/308/20-30.

89. 5P42s. II/308/20-22.

The set of propositions considered in this chapter offer one answer for the path that Spinoza believes he has shown to lead to the things he thinks are of the highest value. The role of method in all of this may be no clearer now than when we began, but in the final section, I will briefly try to distill what I take to be at the heart of what we could call ‘Spinoza’s way’—the method of understanding, of teaching, and of living which seems to underlie his approach.

In the final chapter I will come back to the issue of Spinoza’s necessitarianism, which has been just under the surface throughout this discussion, and the threat of nihilism, which arises if we try to figure out how to reconcile the necessity of the divine nature with the equally necessary facts about our limited embodied temporal experience. I cannot hope to solve these issues in a single chapter, but I do hope that I will have shown that they are implications of Spinoza’s distinctive philosophical method, and that if Spinoza’s method has anything to offer us, its most worrisome implications and assumptions must be handled with sufficient care.⁹⁰

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered sixty-eight propositions constituting the end-points of Spinoza’s philosophical system as he develops it in the *Ethics*. This consideration is justified by the structure of the text itself. The Euclidean style may not be required by Spinoza’s method, or its content, but it has several features that I have taken advantage of in order to elucidate the text in ways that have hitherto remained largely unexplored. First, in Chapter 4, I considered the general phenomenon of ‘unused’ or

90. These implications indeed threaten to make the idea of method as pointless as ethics, at least insofar as either is conceived to require a certain kind of normativity. The reminder to emphasize the tandem threat posed by necessitarianism I owe to Matthew Taylor.

‘idle’ material, which presents a problem for interpretations of the text that make use of elements whose meaning is obscured by lack of use. In this chapter, however, this same phenomenon offers us the opportunity to catalogue those propositions (and corollaries) that lack further explicit usage in the text, and to treat these as end-points of Spinoza’s arguments. My aim was to use this strategy to illuminate features of the text that may help us better grasp Spinoza’s philosophy, both in its method and in its overarching themes.

The order of this chapter largely follows the order of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. This is in part simply expedience, but it is no accident that Spinoza proceeds in this order. Consider the first series of propositions, C1-C10. They ostensibly concern ‘God’, a concept which Spinoza reworks into one coextensive with Nature, efficient and immanent causation, and absolute necessity. As I hope I have shown, these properties, of naturalism, necessity, and monism, utterly determine the rest of Spinoza’s philosophical views. The later conclusions, however, are not immediately discernible from the outset precisely because they require long chains of demonstrations in order to produce the connections necessary to tie more complex concepts back to these foundations.

These chains begin from God, and proceed through a revisionist account of knowledge, which characterizes various forms of knowledge in terms of their relationship to external and internal causes. This ties knowledge directly to God’s causation: the best knowledge (the third kind) is caused directly by God, the worst knowledge (the first kind) is caused only indirectly by God, mediated by interactions between parts which limit other parts, resulting necessarily in confusion and error. Reason thus becomes a kind of bridge which, through strict adherence to procedure, can guide us to knowledge of the third kind (which in some sense must already exist in us).

Some years ago, Douglas Lewis remarked that “if one wished to sum up the purpose of Spinoza’s writing in a single statement, the following one would be more accurate: ‘Spinoza’s writing aims to aid its reader in accomplishing the traditional end of philosophy: forming a conception of the order of the whole of nature satisfying the demands of reason and developing the capacity to maintain and sustain this conception in his own thoughts.’”⁹¹ Lewis’s view builds upon Wolfson’s, and, though clearly expressing a powerful general formulation, I think we must now add that, given the focus of Spinoza’s sixty-eight doctrines, Spinoza’s argument is also specifically aimed at understanding and potentially extirpating Hate.

The identification of God’s immediate, immanent causation with the third kind of knowledge, and mediated, external causation with knowledge the first kind, necessarily leads to Spinoza’s views concerning Hate and Blessedness.

Hate, conceived as necessarily involving an external component, can never involve the third kind of knowledge, because that kind of knowledge is immanent. Spinoza’s concern with elucidating so many ways in which Hate is produced seems to be directed toward showing us that insofar as we Hate we are confused.

Likewise, Blessedness and virtue cannot be anything besides an immanently caused internal state, thus identified with immanent knowledge, and so anything related to blessedness or virtue cannot be related to passions or external causes at all.

Thus, Spinoza’s method leads us to conceive things according to the universal order and necessity of Nature, and this leads to a reconceiving of what it means to be human. But this reconception is not intended to stray far from ordinary experience. It is, rather, intended to make sense of such experience. This does not mean that Spinoza must adopt an ordinary language philosophy approach which relegates him to

91. Lewis, “On the Aims and Method of Spinoza’s Philosophy,” 229.

describing the ways in which words are used. Spinoza's philosophy of language, and his theory of interpretation, commit him to conditions of intelligibility that require confirmation in experience in a certain way.

When Spinoza makes claims about Hate, he is strictly referring neither to the ordinary concept, which may be employed carefully or confusedly, nor to an arcane philosophical generalization, but rather to a specific phenomenon in Nature which has clear criteria according to its definition. This phenomenon may bear a family resemblance to some of the ways in which the word 'hate' is ordinarily used (and so much the better for its intelligibility). Indeed, Spinoza acknowledges that "it is clear that the names of the affects are found more from the ordinary usage [of words] than from an accurate knowledge [of the affects]."⁹² He also claims in a letter to Henry Oldenburg:

I would think that notions derived from ordinary usage, or which explain Nature, not as it is in itself, but as it is related to human sense perception, ought neither to be counted among the chief kinds, nor to be mixed (not to say confused) with pure notions, which explain Nature as it is in itself.⁹³

Despite this demotion of ordinary usage, Spinoza is clear that he is not trying to completely revise language. I covered this in greater detail in Chapter 3, but consider again Spinoza's explication of 3DAXX:

I know that in their common usage these words mean something else. But my purpose is to explain the nature of things, not the meaning of words. I intend to indicate these things by words whose usual meaning is not entirely opposed to the meaning with which I wish to use them. One warning of this should suffice.

92. 3P52s. II/180/30-35.

93. *Ep. VI*. IV/28/10-15.

Spinoza's explicit endorsement of the aim of explaining the nature of things is, I think, unambiguous, and should guide how we approach his use of language.

Spinoza's conclusions concerning eternity for the Mind are subject to this same cautious approach. Spinoza is not committed to a traditional, supernatural conception of the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, he uses the concept 'eternity of the Mind' to refer to something that he thinks exists and is committed to explaining. This turns out to be a necessary feature of bodies conceived as parts of the eternal Substance. This consequence is again required by Spinoza's order of philosophizing, from the top down.

In the chapter on Spinoza's conception of method, I concluded that Spinoza's conception does not change throughout his philosophical development. It consists, as I showed, in principles for distinguishing true from false perceptions, in prioritizing the whole over the parts as far as the rules governing understanding are concerned, and in avoiding wearying the mind with useless things. Consider this in the light of the order in which Spinoza's conclusions arise in the *Ethics*. The whole (God, or Nature) certainly takes priority over the parts. Spinoza's emphasis on a careful descriptive account of the passions seems aimed primarily at distinguishing true virtue from false⁹⁴.

Finally, Spinoza's focus on the necessity of our durational lives, and the misguided, confused way in which we perceive virtue, can easily be seen as an attempt to help us avoid wearying ourselves with useless concerns. Spinoza's reaffirmation of the value of Morality and Religion in C67 suggest that he wants to ensure that the narrowing effect of his method does not cause us to mistake the rejection of many tenets of traditional

94. Humility and Repentance are particularly salient examples of this. Spinoza's account tells us that most appearances of humility and repentance that are lauded are, in truth, disguises for ambition and envy.

morality and religion for a wholesale rejection of these things as useless. We just need new rules (and the conditions under which we will necessarily follow them).

So, with that, we have tied together Spinoza's method, his metaphysics, his epistemology, and his moral philosophy. In doing so, I hope to have illuminated at least some aspects of each of these, though my focus is primarily on the method itself. We are confronted now with the reality that the necessity which underlies Spinoza's metaphysics, his method, and his morality, threatens all of them. If method and morality are conceived in such a way that they necessarily require normativity in order to be of value, then living according to Spinoza's philosophy is an impossible dream. If, on the other hand, these things can be reconceived so that they either do not require normativity, or usefulness is reconceived so that it does not require a future which is open to multiple possibilities, then Spinoza's project may yet retain some plausibility.

The possibility of a coherent Spinozist system depends on how Spinoza's commitments to necessity and the power of the mind over the affects is understood. As we have seen, Spinoza powerfully argues for a naturalistic account of the power of the human mind and its ability to be guided by the dictates of reason. The possibility of following reason's dictates seems to be grounded in an account of human nature itself, which may or may not be overcome in particular cases by the overriding necessity of external causes. If we are to retain genuine possibility of following through on the ethical and political aims Spinoza appears to strongly endorse, here and now, in particular situations, then we need to face the limits of this possibility head on, and consider what this implies for our moral and political assumptions. The strength of the geometrical method is its programmatic demonstrative necessity. Yet, it seems that when applied to the psychological and moral realms, its power is both a blessing

and an apparent curse: we may see more clearly what the value and disvalue of the affects is for us, and yet we seem not necessarily better able to bring about conditions under which we can make use of this information.

The next chapter is an attempt to present a synthesis of everything that has been covered in these preceding five chapters, and to treat the nihilistic implications of Spinoza's method seriously. In the current chapter, the threat of nihilism arose most powerfully during the consideration of Spinoza's final doctrines. This nihilism, which arises from Spinoza's commitment to necessity, and to monism, and to naturalism, which I argue also underlie his philosophical method, threatens to undermine Spinoza's final conviction that the way to Blessedness and Salvation can be found, and indeed that there could be room in this life for Morality, Religion, and Politics.

Chapter 6

Beyond the Geometrical Method: How is Spinozism an Ethics?

Besides the theological concern about human haughtiness, it was the threat of necessitarianism that was the true source of the lasting protest against the Geometrical Method throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.¹

—*Ursula Goldenbaum*

6.1 Introduction

We have just seen that Spinoza is strongly, demonstratively, committed to claims about the value of certain kinds of Love and Joy, and the disvalue of Hate and other sad passions. We have also seen that Spinoza considers the guidance of reason to be a powerful mechanism to which we can be lead by modulation of our affects, or by reason alone. In doing this, we may make things go better for ourselves and others, morally and politically, in the future. Yet, one of the most unique and perennially troubling aspects of Spinoza's philosophy has been how to understand Spinoza's ethical and political views in the light of his causal necessitarianism. Political theorists who find

1. Goldenbaum, "Geometrical Method — Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy."

something of value in Spinoza may need to overlook *prima facie* confounding features of his metaphysics; conversely, metaphysicians who find rationalist systematicity compelling may tend to overlook or underplay the problems causal necessity appears to generate for the political and ethical upshots of the system.²

Is Spinoza's philosophy incoherent? If not, is it, as Jacobi charges, tantamount to atheism, fatalism, and nihilism? He says in one place "Spinozism is atheism. . . Every avenue of demonstration ends up in fatalism."³ Metaphysicians, on the other hand, will be troubled for different reasons. Paul Franks suggests that for Jacobi, "Systematic monism, atheism, fatalism, and nihilism were irrefutable, because they were inevitable results of the rationalist project of demonstrating, comprehending or explaining everything without limitation."⁴ If Jacobi's assessment is accurate, this is indeed a difficult dilemma to resolve. On the one hand, the virtue of a philosophical system that is committed to the complete explicability of all things seems undeniable, especially given that the alternative, allowing brute facts, seems to bring philosophy to an end. But on the other hand, the very principle that demands the explicability of everything seems to run aground against the dictates of logic and the rules of good science.

As Charles Huenemann puts it, "denying that anything nonactual is possible makes it hard to do good philosophy. Counterfactuals all end up being vacuously true, essential characteristics become indistinguishable from nonessential ones, and it is impossible to distinguish laws of nature from any 'accidental' regularities."⁵

2. See, e.g., Jonathan Bennett's brutal remarks about the fifth part of the *Ethics* in his *Study*, or Russell, who proclaims "A modern student, who cannot suppose that there are rigorous 'proofs' of such things as he professes to establish, is bound to grow impatient with the detail of the demonstrations, which is, in fact, not worth mastering." (Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 523)

3. Jacobi, "Letters to Mendelssohn Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza (1785)," 223–234.

4. Franks, "All or Nothing: Systematicity and Nihilism in Jacobi, Reinhold, and Maimon," 99.

5. Huenemann, "But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?," 115.

Thus, we seem to be faced with a dilemma of adjudicating between either accepting brute inexplicable facts and losing certain useful features of philosophy as we know it. Spinoza's method appears now as an ouroboros, head consuming tail, threatening to annihilate the whole.

Recently, there has been a tendency in the scholarship to try to represent Spinoza as a normative theorist (or at least a quasi-normative theorist), who can account for the reality of subjective experience in a way that is not unlike that of post-Kantian philosophers.⁶ This trend in Spinoza scholarship may be taken to be a response to the interrogative: how is Spinoza's *Ethics* an ethics? Put another way: given Spinoza's necessitarianism, can his philosophy support normative content? If not, it seems that the title of his most important work is a misnomer and his political philosophy may be nothing more than an exercise in description that leads us nowhere. Huenemann notes that "the doctrine makes it hard to see why people should be held morally accountable for what they do—for no one can ever do otherwise."⁷ This raises the question of whether Spinoza has room for a notion of 'responsibility' at all. His descriptive project in the *Ethics* seems to preclude this, since one of the central lessons is that if we understand the Affects, then we are bound to treat them just as we treat all (other) matters of physics, *viz.* as following from the necessity of Nature.

One reason such seemingly incompatible readings can be plausible for Spinoza is that there is a good deal of evidence for both. This has led to some ambiguity, if not confusion, concerning the doctrines Spinoza's philosophy generates, sustains, or is otherwise committed to. One line of reasoning produces claims that can appear

6. See, e.g., Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*; Steinberg, "Following a Recta Ratio Vivendi: The Practical Utility of Spinoza's Dictates of Reason"; Borchering, "A View from Nowhere? The Place of Subjectivity in Spinoza's Rationalism."

7. Huenemann, "But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?," 116.

normative: we *can* become fully rational, and being rational is the highest good, so we *should* become so.⁸ The other line is the hard deterministic, seemingly fatalistic, line which demonstrates that we are psychologically akin to lines, planes, and solids (i.e., physics), and as such must accept things as they are, not as we want them to be.

In this chapter, I build on my interpretation of Spinoza's method, and the doctrines covered in the previous chapter, to offer a reading of these two seemingly incompatible lines of argument in Spinoza's *Ethics*, which, when properly understood, produces a clearer methodological, metaphysical, and ethical picture of Spinoza's philosophy. If Spinoza's necessitarianism undermines ethics, then it also undermines method. This makes a clear account of Spinoza's necessitarianism crucial for the viability of either area of his thought. Furthermore, the fact that Spinoza binds his conception of living a good life so tightly with his method, and that both of these involve necessity suggests that Spinoza is not only aware of the importance of the connections between these concepts, but embraces them.

First, I shall survey the evidence for attributing some kind of normativity to Spinoza. In contraposition, I show just how committed Spinoza is to necessitarianism, and what this means for his ethical doctrines. Finally, I will suggest that Spinozism can be an ethics, despite the lack of a post-Kantian subjective ground for freedom, and this is where Spinoza's greatest usefulness to us lies.

8. See, e.g., LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence*; Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life*; Steinberg, "Affect, Desire, and Judgement in Spinoza's Account of Motivation."

6.2 The First Line: Reason's Possibilities

H.A. Wolfson bluntly suggests that “the title of [Spinoza’s] chief work needs some explanation”⁹ and furthermore,

the term ‘ethics’ therefore, would seem not to be used quite accurately by Spinoza as a description of the contents of his work called by that name. Spinoza, however, had ample justification for the use of the term ‘ethics’ as the title of a book of which the greater part consisted of metaphysics and psychology.¹⁰

Wolfson’s explanation, however, is a historical one—Spinoza is justified because Aristotle used the term this way. This is a fine explanation for *why* Spinoza used the term ‘ethics’ as the title of the text, but it does not suffice as a justification for attributing to Spinoza an ethics which resembles something that could be understood, and perhaps even utilized by, a reader of the text.

On the face of it, there is a startling dichotomy between the subject matter with which Spinoza seems most concerned—ethics and politics—and the strict adherence to a metaphysical doctrine that appears to all but eliminate the possibility of traditional ethical and political concepts. As we saw in the previous chapter, this metaphysical picture begins to emerge almost immediately in the *Ethics*, in the definitions of *Part I*.

6.2.1 Miller’s Spinoza’s Possibilities

Jon Miller has argued that Spinoza’s conceptions of possibility and necessity are compatible. He contends that

it does not necessarily follow (for Spinoza or anyone else), though, that all possible particulars are existent. Why not? Because there could be particulars

9. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: unfolding the latent processes of his reasoning*, 35.

10. *Ibid.*, 36–37.

that are possible, insofar as the laws of nature do not necessarily prohibit their existence, and yet do not and could not exist, because the causal order does not allow them to exist.¹¹

On Miller's view, there are two concepts of possibility in Spinoza's philosophy: doxastic and nomological.¹² The former "usually refers to actually existing things and not... nonexistent particulars."¹³ The latter are what "the laws of Nature countenance", i.e., "many things—many more than actually were, are, or will be the case—so this conception of possibility is not as narrow as it may at first seem."¹⁴ The nomological conception of possibility is an interesting one, because it allows for true counterfactuals, but, because of the doxastic conception, these true counterfactuals could never be actual. This is a counterintuitive thought. We ordinarily think that if something is possible, then there are conditions which could be met such that the possible thing could be actual. Yet, even in modern science we must deal with the fact that sometimes the laws of nature seem to permit things that we know can never be. The Ideal Gas Law, $PV = nRT$, for instance, predicts properties of gases at temperatures and pressures at which (when very high or very low) there can never actually be any gas.¹⁵ As Miller points out, Spinoza's two concepts of necessity are used in vastly different ways. What's more, only God or Nature "satisfies both conditions for freedom."¹⁶ The importance of the concept of 'necessity' becomes much clearer once it is acknowledged that there is no possibility of alternative possibilities for actually existing things.

11. Miller, "Spinoza's Possibilities," 812.

12. Ibid., 813.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 810.

15. There might, instead, be plasma or some other form of matter. On some related issues concerning laws of nature and the actual world, see the seminal paper, Cartwright, "Do the Laws of Physics State the Facts?"

16. Ibid., 814.

The arguments of the previous chapter of this dissertation support Miller's conclusion concerning the ethical importance of necessity, according to which "if Spinoza could convince his readers to accept as necessary all existent particulars, then he could significantly advance his ethical objectives, for the actual ethics of the *Ethics* is predicated on the existence of a universal and eternal metaphysical determinism."¹⁷ While Miller's argument may resolve the apparent incompatibility between two concepts of possibility and help to emphasize the connection between Spinoza's ethical doctrines and his conception of necessity, the argument does not show how Spinoza's ethical doctrines can be *seriously* advanced, since even on a less stringent necessitarian reading of Spinoza, there still seems to be no room to maneuver, ethically or methodically.

6.2.2 'Free' and 'Necessary'

The seventh definition of the *Ethics*, 1D7, sets up Spinoza's conceptions of 'free' and 'necessary' such that "that thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner." Most strikingly, Spinoza's conception of freedom *involves* necessity.

Thus, for Spinoza, freedom and necessity are not radically opposed, but are rather two different degrees of necessity. The distinction amounts not to a difference in *kind*, but a difference in the origin of a determination. This is precisely the conception of freedom which is rejected by Kant and the German Idealists, leading Fichte to stipulate that the first principle of his system must be a radically undetermined *self-positing* 'I'. Such a first principle is a complete inversion of the metaphysics of Spinoza.

17. Miller, "Spinoza's Possibilities," 814.

Spinoza's conception of freedom may seem to his opponents to be a case of doublespeak: freedom as enslavement to one's nature. Yet, Spinoza does not deny that individual beings can grow and change and respond to reasons.¹⁸ Thus, we need an account of the precise sense in which individuals can change, and in what sense they can respond to reasons, if we are to determine whether these claims are compatible with Spinoza's necessitarianism, and if they are compatible, what this means for Spinoza's ethical and political doctrines more generally.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the definition of freedom and necessity for Spinoza. 1D7 is invoked explicitly in five demonstrations: 1P17c2, 1P32, 1P33s2, 2P17s, and 3P49. The complexity of the geometrical order quickly generates an unwieldy number of descendants. This includes, predictably, much of the fourth part of the *Ethics*, *Of Human Bondage*, and culminates in arguments for many of the propositions after 5P20 in the final section of the book, titled *Of the Power of the Understanding or Of Human Freedom*.¹⁹

One important proposition for Spinoza's view of the power of reason is not immediately discernible from the previous geometrical chain: 4P59. The elements employed in the demonstration of 4P59 are: 3P3, 3D2, 4P41, 4P43, 3DAIV, 3DAI, 4P45c1 and 4P19. Of these, 1D7 is a clear geometrical ancestor of 4P41 and 4P43, via 3P11s; and 4P19, via 3P28.²⁰

It is straightforward enough to see how 1D7 figures in the content of these propositions. 4P19 explicates human conceptions of good and evil through the necessary laws

18. The latter phrase occupies a central role in Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume One*. The first chapter begins with the insistence that "we are the animals that can understand and respond to reasons." (ibid., 1) Settling the sense in which this is possible, if it is possible, matters a great deal.

19. Consider the title of *Ethics IV* now in the light of the features of the method that Spinoza has endorsed. Spinoza's focus in this part of the *Ethics* can now be seen as quite literally an instantiation of that part of his method concerned with giving us knowledge of our power of understanding.

20. For proof of these chains see *Ethics 2.0*.

of each thing's nature. 4P41 explicates Joy in terms of an increase in an individual's activity, Sadness in terms of its decrease. 4P43 extends 4P41 to demonstrate that increases in activity may be excessive and decreases may be good.

Later, Spinoza derives the claim, in 4P59, that any passive determination *can* equally be active, or rational. The subsequent conclusion in the scholium of that proposition asserts that if we *could* be guided by reason, passionate desires would be useless. These points are then used in 5P4 and 5P20 to argue that we *can* form clear and distinct conceptions of our entire bodies, and thus no emotion is truly contrary to the *amor dei intellectualis* (the *summum bonum*).

Thus, since it is possible that any passive determination be active, we seem to be able to fully perfect ourselves (i.e., insofar as we have a certain and determinate nature that itself is actually already perfect in Nature), and since we necessarily *want* perfection, oughtn't we fully perfect ourselves? This, and a number of other claims, have been used to suggest that the purpose of the *Ethics* is to make it possible to guide ourselves and possibly others, by the dictates of reason, seemingly without any determinate limits.²¹

Spinoza further claims that "no one has yet determined what the Body can do,"²² which might seem to suggest that, at the very least, we cannot deny ourselves unknown increases in rationality or perfection.²³ But this seems completely antithetical to the necessitarian Spinoza whose ethical upshots more often than not seem to run in the opposite direction, toward accepting (only if we can) things as they are, not as we want them to be.

21. See: Steinberg, "Following a Recta Ratio Vivendi: The Practical Utility of Spinoza's Dictates of Reason."

22. 3P2s.

23. I owe this point to Oberto Marrama.

The latter is a key ethical implication of the *Ethics* (not to mention the *TTP* and *TP*). Even so, there is still an open question about what this means with respect to ethical activities such as helping others to become better, or to make better decisions, or to make things go better in the future.

This is especially true politically, and in the current climate we can see this question arise in the context of starkly polarized, emotionally-charged, seemingly tribal allegiance to ideologies or parties or persons.²⁴

Ericka Tucker has argued that Spinoza “in his political works, and beginning even earlier... seeks to show how human society based on human affects and imagination can be made more secure through developing more reasonable institutions and customs.”²⁵ Tucker’s claim makes clear that Spinoza focuses on the *possibility* of this improvement in socio-political security. This possibility is not guaranteed, and nor does it seem entirely clear that there can be any strong normative force here. Spinoza cannot, for example, say that each one of us has a duty to support security through rational institution and custom-building. Even Spinoza’s ‘free man’, if it were an actually existing person, could not make everyone else obey the dictates of reason.

To reinforce the struggle between Spinoza’s descriptive account of political virtue and the reality of the affective bondage of the citizenry, consider the following passage:

Those who’ve experienced how changeable the mentality of the multitude is almost despair about it. They’re governed only by affects, not by reason. [...] Everyone knows how it goes—a disgust with the present, a craving to make fundamental changes, uncontrolled anger, a scorn for poverty—these affects

24. A number of scholars are currently working on Spinozistically-motivated accounts of the affects—both generally and in relation to recent changes in the political climate in the United States and Europe—including Tucker, “Hope, Hate and Indignation: Spinoza on Political Emotion.”

25. Tucker, “Spinoza’s Social Sage: Emotion and the Power of Reason in Spinoza’s Social Theory,” 4.

lead men to wickedness. Everyone knows how much they fill and disturb men's hearts.²⁶

Here, Spinoza acknowledges that the difficulty of ensuring political stability is a challenge even for those leaders who may be most rational. He suggests that leaders who encounter the vicissitudes of the multitude may even be affected severely negatively, to the point of nihilistic despair. How easy it would be, if one is a necessitarian, to say: look at how easily manipulated and affected by hate everyone is? Why bother trying to help them, if in the next moment they could turn on me?

Yet, it is here that I think Spinoza's philosophy can be of immense help to us today. Spinoza's unflinching description of the reality of human experience includes both those things that are necessarily harmful and unavoidable and those things that when achieved or implemented or enacted are equally necessarily beneficial. As Spinoza's own remarks intimate, and as I show in the next section, the plausibility of seriously endorsing the ethical aims of the *Ethics* depends, in part, on reconciling his apparently dueling commitments to determinism and self-improvement.

6.3 The Second Line: Nature's Necessity

There is, for Spinoza, a massive gulf between the claim that 'things would be better [or, it would be good] for beings of type X if such and such, Q , were the case.' and 'we ought, as beings of type X , to try to bring it about that Q '. Spinoza cannot, as Kant does, begin with the latter and derive the former and more. Sentences of the former sort can be true, while nevertheless we may simply never be able to bring it about that Q , and so it is unclear why we ought to try at all. Spinoza can avail himself of

26. *TTP XVII*. III/201-203.

the descriptive claim that ‘if some being of type X is rational in the requisite respect, r , X will try to bring it about that Q ’, but this does not mean that there are any, or ought to be any, beings such that Xr . On this view, it is ultimately a contradiction in terms, given Spinoza’s epistemology, to tell a rational person what they ought and ought not to do—such a person is already maximally disposed to a certain and determinate degree to bring about whatever reason demands. Despite this, as we have seen, Spinoza maintains both that his philosophy teaches us to disesteem no one, to hate no one, etc., and that this lesson seems to be implementable, despite the fact that all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature.

6.3.1 Huenemann’s Spinoza’s Necessitarianism

In his recent essay, “But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?,” Charles Huenemann rightly argues that Spinoza “remained resolute in his necessitarianism in the face of all complaints and difficulties.”²⁷ But concludes:

What we will find is that necessitarianism was not something required or implied by his metaphysics, ethics, and religious criticism. It was instead part and parcel of his philosophical methodology, and motivated by his exceedingly severe standard for what counts as an explanation. It was his methodological approach that brought him to see all things as necessary, and even to want to see things that way.²⁸

This claim is redolent of Wartofsky’s view, which we considered in Chapter 1, that Spinoza read his metaphysics off of his method, and that this may be a flaw. If Spinoza’s necessitarian commitments arise out of the method, then this would seem to make his entire ontology subservient to his epistemology (or, as Huenemann

²⁷ Huenemann, “But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?,” 116.

²⁸ Ibid.

hints, his own psychology). Yet, Huenemann's account rests on an interpretation of Spinoza's motives and focus that does not account for the systematic picture developed in the previous chapter. That analysis presents a problem for Huenemann's account of Spinoza's metaphysics, ethics, and ultimately casts the priority of methodology and necessitarianism into doubt. Consider the following claim,

It really is as if Spinoza had two fields of vision that he could not bring into simultaneous focus: there is the world revealed by the eyes of the intellect, a dreamy world in which the eternal and perfect geometrical necessity reigns; and then there is the world shown by his waking eyes, a world ruled by happenstance and impenetrable causal complexity. His inability to connect these two worlds, in the end, splits his monolithic vision in two.²⁹

Huenemann reads Spinoza's philosophy in this way because he interprets Spinoza's account of 'waking life', as it were, as a realm of *conflict*. For Huenemann, Spinoza's vision of the body is one of 'incessant change and death', in which

as I turn my attention to the nature of that one substance, the pathetic sequence of ideas involving my fear and hatred are put into competition with the self-produced sequence of my ideas involving substance, necessity, and immutable causality, and over the long run—if the business of my life allows me sufficient time for continued philosophical reflection—my mind will strive to persevere in that loftier intellectual understanding, and dwell less upon any fears or hopes for matters to end up otherwise.³⁰

If this view of Spinoza's ethical project for finite beings were accurate, Huenemann would be right to conclude that Spinoza has not reconciled two distinct visions of reality. This conclusion would follow from the incongruity between my experience of fear and hatred and the reality of necessity and the inevitable causal order. But, as I have argued in Chapter 5, Spinoza is deeply concerned about the causes of

29. Huenemann, "But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?," 123–124.

30. *Ibid.*, 126.

hate, and the propositions that explicate those causes are just as dependent on his conception of necessity as any other. Perhaps Spinoza does not need to avail himself of necessitarianism in order to make these claims. On that score, Huenemann may be right. However, the doctrines that Spinoza reaches in the ultimate conclusions of the *Ethics* do seem to reveal a conflict that arises between the realities of finite experience and the ideal vision of the intellect.

I have argued that Spinoza's method leads us to conceive things according to the universal order and necessity of Nature. But the way that the method can lead to a desirable outcome is not by means of an internal dispute between the parts of us which hate and fear and despair, and the parts of us which love, and acquiesce, and glory. The transition from wretched to blessed cannot be conceived that way. We cannot *will* (or otherwise *think*) ourselves from sadness to joy, no matter how hard we fight, even if that fight seems to be inside ourselves. That is the main lesson we learned from Spinoza's discussion of the third error he attributes to Descartes and Bacon: that errors are not attributable to the will, but to *external causes*. Huenemann's interpretation does not explicitly attempt to attribute such a blunder to Spinoza, but the emphasis on *competition* between 'pathetic' externally caused sequences of affects and 'self-produced' ideas seems inadvertently to bring it back to this.

It is easy to see how Huenemann's reading suggests that Spinoza is committed to two incompatible realms: the world as passionately experienced, where everything changes and everyone dies; and the world as understood from self-produced ideas alone, where everything persists eternally. Spinoza's view, however, is more nuanced than this. The importance of the *immanence* of God's causal necessity, as evinced by Spinoza's making this one of the ultimate metaphysical doctrines of the *Ethics*

(1P18, or C5 in Appendix A), undermines the competition model of the transition to blessedness.

Insofar as God is an immanent cause, this causation is occurring just as much in the external things by which I am affected as it is in my body insofar as it is in itself.³¹ This immanent causation is necessary in either case, because if it were not, Nature would not be Nature. Thus, we must endorse the view that Spinoza's metaphysics necessitates his necessitarianism. Against this, Huenemann provides the following argument, alluded to above:

1. In the intellect, "all things must be as they are in geometry: timeless, changeless, and necessary."³²
2. In the body, "there is incessant change and death, which inevitably brings on more change and death."³³
3. The *kind* of necessity in (1), changeless eternity, is different from the *kind* of necessity in (2), incessant change.
4. Necessity (1) is irreconcilable with Necessity (2).
5. Therefore, Spinoza's "necessitarianism was complicated by his twin metaphysical visions, and not explained or required by them."³⁴

The key premises here are (2) and (4)—without these, the argument collapses, and Huenemann will not have shown that Spinoza's necessitarianism is not explained or required by his metaphysics. To see this, consider what happens to the argument if we change (2). Perhaps Spinoza's conception of the body is *not* one of incessant change,

31. It should be emphasized that there are no bodies in themselves, strictly speaking, since all bodies are in God. The internally caused features of bodies are always necessarily modified by their interactions with external things.

32. Huenemann, "But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?," 124.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

but rather that in both the intellect and the body there is not really any change. This Parmenidean reading of Spinoza finds support in the work of Michael Della Rocca.³⁵

Della Rocca has argued, in one place, that the PSR leads to necessitarianism.³⁶ In another place, he argues that “the PSR and the rationalist denial of multiplicity and distinctions lead us to expect that finite things and relations between things and their states exist *to some degree* even if they do not fully exist.”³⁷ These two claims imply that necessitarianism requires that finite things exist to some degree, even if they do not fully exist. Set aside qualms about what it may mean for things to ‘partially’ exist. Huenemann’s argument requires that bodies (or the body of the whole universe), involve incessant change and death. But these are precisely the features, which, for Della Rocca, make bodies only ‘partially’ exist. Things (i.e., bodies and their ideas) really exist only to the extent that they are not, or do not involve, extrinsic determination and negation. That is, for any particular body, it exists only to the degree that it does not change, but only expresses a certain and determinate way of being (or a certain and determinate ‘piece’ of the absolutely infinite power of God or Nature). What this means is that to be a body is to be a part of Nature in a particular way. It does not follow that *in* any body there is incessant change and death. These

35. See, e.g., Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, Della Rocca, “PSR,” Della Rocca, “Rationalism, idealism, monism, and beyond.” For a cogent objection to this reading, see Melamed, “The Sirens of Elea: Rationalism, Monism and Idealism in Spinoza.” For another excellent discussion of the relationship between rationalism and necessitarianism, see Lin, “Rationalism and Necessitarianism.”

36. Della Rocca, “PSR.” The claim that the PSR *leads* to necessitarianism suggests an endorsement of the view that Spinoza reads his necessitarianism off an endorsement of the principle. If this is Della Rocca’s view, it is similar to what Huenemann and Wartofsky have said. It is possible, however, that the claim is not one of methodological, metaphysical, or indeed epistemic, priority. If Nature is absolutely necessary, it may follow that some version of the PSR ought to be endorsed if we are to be rational. If we are able to know the necessity of Nature, we may do so employing a version of the PSR, and perhaps this is methodologically best. However, it does not seem obvious in any of these cases either that this is the order in which Spinoza arrived at his views, or that this is the order of the relationship that actually holds between them.

37. Della Rocca, “Rationalism, idealism, monism, and beyond,” 20.

would, indeed, be incompatible.

It is difficult to attribute such an obvious contradiction to Spinoza, who goes to great lengths to deny that there is any contradiction in just such a case. Consider the famous passage (which I have quoted at length in an earlier chapter) on the distinction between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata* in 1P29s.³⁸ In Chapter 5 I suggest that this passage plays a role in Spinoza's doctrine at 1P31, with the purpose of restricting free causation to God or Nature only in the *naturans* aspect. Spinoza's purpose there is precisely to assert the necessity of all things in Nature, whether *naturata* or *naturans*. The fact that the sense in which *Natura naturans* is necessary is different from the sense in which the elements of *Natura naturata* are necessary is just the same as the way in which the angular velocity of the rotating wheels on a bicycle follows the laws of nature in a different sense than the velocity of the bike as a whole. Of course these are conceptually distinct. But a bicycle is no more or less determined than its wheels.

The problem of unchanging wholes with changing parts seems to be precisely what Spinoza has in mind when he provides the following somewhat cryptic example:

For example, we conceive that water is divided and its parts separated from one another—insofar as it is water, but not insofar as it is corporeal substance. For insofar as it is substance, it is neither separated nor divided. Again, water, insofar as it is water, is generated and corrupted, but insofar as it is substance, it is neither generated nor corrupted.³⁹

Spinoza explicitly asserts regarding this problem that “matter is everywhere the same, and that the parts are distinguished in it only insofar as we conceive matter to

38. Here, I focus on the passage in the *Ethics*. Spinoza addresses these two concepts in chapters VIII and IX of his *KV*, but his remarks there are less well-developed. It is noteworthy, however, that Spinoza builds motion directly into the concept of *Natura naturata*, which does indeed seem to preclude it from being identical with an unchanging Substance. Yet Spinoza does think these two *Naturae* are identical.

39. 1P15s. II/60.

be affected in different ways, so that its parts are distinguished only modally, but not really.”⁴⁰

This is particularly strong evidence that Huenemann’s premise (2) would not really (but perhaps only modally) be accepted by Spinoza. Modally, there is change and death, but really matter is everywhere the same. This does not imply, as Della Rocca argues, that modal change does not fully exist. Against Della Rocca, Melamed argues poignantly that “for Spinoza the excellence of minds is a function of their complexity, which reflects the complexity of the parallel bodies (2p13s). When we detach the substance from its modes we seem to get an entity with infinitesimal complexity and an extremely dumb thought.”⁴¹ Spinoza’s monism requires that Substance and its modes are one and the same thing. But that monism does not require that Substance and its modes cannot be distinguished, or cannot have seemingly incompatible properties.

Modes are distinguished, and have distinct properties from Substance precisely because they are parts of which Substance is the whole. This is why premise (4) cannot be correct either. Premise (3) is correct: there are two kinds of necessity, but one—the causal necessity of the interactions of bodies (and their correspondent minds)—is a modal, partial, expression of the underlying, absolute necessity of Nature. These are not irreconcilable, as I have said, any more than angular velocity is irreconcilable with forward velocity. This analogy only goes so far. It does not, for one thing, establish the actual nature of the relation between imagination and intellect. It also does not guarantee that Spinoza could not produce his metaphysics without necessitarianism (though it should be noted that Spinoza *does* think his metaphysics requires necessity). It does, however, show that Huenemann’s dismissal of a metaphysically grounded

40. 1P15s. II/59/30-35.

41. Melamed, “The Sirens of Elea: Rationalism, Monism and Idealism in Spinoza,” 88.

necessitarianism is too quick.

Huenemann has thus not made the case that “necessitarianism, it seems, was an inevitable *consequence* of the kind of approach Spinoza took toward philosophical explanation, as well as the kind of style he employed in conveying those explanations.”⁴² In my view, Spinoza’s necessitarianism is an immediate feature of his conception of God or Nature, i.e., as one, indivisible, absolutely infinite, as an immanent cause—all the doctrines from *Ethics I* that we saw in Chapter 5. Spinoza’s method, as I have described it, is a consequence of that metaphysical picture. Spinoza’s admonishment to follow the ‘proper order of philosophizing’, which proceeds from wholes to parts, suggests that this is correct: we begin with Nature as a whole, and only from this conception can we understand what its parts must be like, and only then can we derive methods and orders for thinking about, and understanding those parts.

6.4 Conclusion

Remarking on Spinoza’s Stoic-ness, Jon Miller characterizes Spinoza’s worldview via a chain of hypothetical dilemmas, in which, at each stage, Spinoza and the Stoics grab the same horn:

One can either think of the world as constituting a single unified active entity or not. If one does then one can either think of that entity as operating in strictly deterministic terms or not. If one thinks of it as determined, one can also think of the world as ultimately rational and intelligible or not. If one thinks this, one can think of the world as fundamentally self-preserving or not. If one thinks that the world bears all those properties, then one may think of members of the world (especially human beings) as sharing the same features of the world or not. If one does, then one thinks that members of the world are also determined, rational, intelligible, and self-preserving beings. If one thinks this of members

42. Emphasis mine. Huenemann, “But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?,” 130.

of the world, then one can think that their flourishing lies in identifying fully with their natures and Nature as a whole or not.⁴³

Miller's book ends with the following cryptic remark: "If there is a secret remaining about the similarity between Spinoza and the Stoics, I suppose it must concern how it is that one comes to accept those views about the world and ourselves together with the underlying arguments in the first place."⁴⁴

The solution may rest in becoming clear about Spinoza's methodology. If he is, as he says, committed to the view that our psychology is configured just as if it were a matter of lines, planes, and solids, then it seems to follow that we may need to be resigned, if we are able to be, however fatalistically, to the playing out of infinitely many minds (and their corresponding bodies) interacting however passionately with other minds (and bodies) they necessarily must encounter. We would, on this view, be stuck with whatever horrific or awesome effects this infinite causal interplay has, with no real recourse to such purportedly efficacious moral concepts as 'freedom of the will', '[personal] responsibility', 'duty', or perhaps even 'normativity'.

As a result, the role of reason in Spinoza's metaphysic seems to lack real normative significance. It becomes a descriptor for whatever degree of rationality anyone does actually muster at any given point, rather than an ideal toward which *anyone* could actually aim.

There is still a nice consequence here that may help us avoid utter despair. There are many people on this planet, and insofar as we are people, we share much in common. When circumstances are just right, the determined (necessary) efforts of

43. Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, 209–210.

44. *Ibid.*, 210.

the best among us can bring it about that things go better for many of us.⁴⁵ While there can be no necessary teleological progress of history, there is, still, always the possibility that no matter how bad things are going, they may go better. For this, we do not need hope or fear, though we may have no choice but to undergo these affects. We need only the causal unfolding of infinite nature as it already is, and time. This is small consolation for those who would benefit from things going better here and now, and that may be why human beings are so prone to superstition. That basic feature of human psychology itself belies the reality that nature itself does not always go our way.

If we think of Nature first, before all other things, we can see our place more accurately. All of us are parts of the universe, and share our powers with those that are most like us. We are lucky to be as powerful as we are, and we are mistaken when we attempt to go beyond this. To whatever extent we are able, all of us are always already attempting to bring about things that we think are good, but we do not know what our limits are, either individually or combined. With the aid of a true method, we might sometimes be able to make things go best.

45. The word 'effort' might connote an incompatibility with necessity, but I mean here only a description of the necessary striving of these individuals, which is, by definition, more powerful than others.

Conclusion

But the separation of politics from theology and ethics demanded a price. Well-trained Political Aristotelians, Monarchomachs and Republicans were poorly equipped to address the new issues concerning human nature, soul and body, and the place of the passions. Philosophers such as Descartes and Hobbes also raised new questions concerning scientific method. As Hermann Conring and Franciscus van den Enden realised, they were no longer living in the world of Ramists and Aristotelians, but of empiricists, Cartesians and geometrists. Once again profound changes in philosophy and the understanding of science started to change the study of politics, leading to the demise and renewal of the lessons of Aristotelians, Monarchomachs and Republicans. Conring corresponded with Samuel von Pufendorf; Van den Enden was the host, teacher and friend of Baruch de Spinoza.⁴⁶

—*Martin van Gelderen*

This dissertation is first of all a treatise on method. Yet, in approaching things from this direction, I intended the outcome to illuminate the importance of method for Spinoza's philosophy as a whole. In the back of my mind, there has always been a nagging thought, stoked and provoked and prodded by many non-Spinozist philosophers, that Spinoza's philosophy is at bottom untenable because it purports to be an ethics and a politics, but asserts an incompatible unwavering necessity of Nature.

I have always thought that what is unique and interesting about Spinoza is not

46. Gelderen, *Republicanism: Volume 1, Republicanism and Constitutionalism in Early Modern Europe: A Shared European Heritage*, 217.

simply a method, nor the employment of a Euclidean order of demonstration, since these things are not unique to Spinoza, but the implications that Spinoza methodically draws out of his basic principles, which are focused primarily on ethics and politics, and the social life of human beings in general. Indeed, the two are intimately bound up with one another. Spinoza, just as any of us might, may have held many of his views without also having adopted a methodical approach to philosophy or life, but as I have shown in Chapter 1, the principles of the necessity of Nature, and of monism, and of naturalism, lend themselves to being born out by a method that proceeds from whole to part, explicating all and only what is necessary for each of us.

Principles M1, M2, M3 are Spinoza's methodological virtues: knowledge of our power of understanding, understanding everything that is to be understood (limited by our individual power), and avoiding wearying the mind through the use of rules. These combine with a commitment to the order of one's mind being the same as the order of nature (in a certain and determinate, limited, way), and the use of the geometric style to emphasize the necessity of the order of nature.

The relationship between Spinoza's method and those of his predecessors, Zabarella and Hobbes, Bacon, and Descartes is, I argue in Chapter 2, complex. Spinoza's method ultimately turns out to be at least partially a conscious modification of aspects of all of them in the light of his commitments to the methodological and metaphysical principles elucidated in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 3, I argue that these principles require Spinoza to adopt principles in the philosophy of language which are, as he says, one and the same as the laws of nature more generally. Words, for Spinoza, are parts of the physical aspect of Nature, and are thus subject to the laws of bodies. Ideas, or Thoughts, on the other hand, though

they may be expressed with words, are the correspondent mental components which necessarily track bodies, whether they be words, behaviours, actions, or reactions. The method of understanding words is thereby identical with the method of understanding Nature.

Meaning requires use, and where use is obscure, meaning also requires knowledge, because word use is, like knowledge, essentially a representation of a causal order: we discern meaning by picking out the same things with the same names. In the case of words, these things are memories of perceptions or ideas. The *MRU* and *MRK* principles also help to define the limits of M1-M3, because, e.g., we do not have a power of understanding sentences when we do not know how the words are being used.

The *ordo geometricus* and the topical order of the *Ethics* embody Spinoza's commitment to top-down, general to particular, epistemic priority and the immanent causation of Nature. But because the style is truncated, it requires explicit references in order to discern usage, and therefore meaning. Thus, uncited elements are obscure, and may not be discernible. Spinoza's principles of interpretation and meaning lead to a difficulty with the text of the *Ethics*. In Chapter 4, I suggest that Spinoza's use of the Euclidean form generates a problem of interpretation just in case an element goes uncited in the text, and we are unable to account for this by means of pointing to its non-circular implicit use. This difficulty however, illuminates not only the flaws in Spinoza's text, if examined carefully, but also offers a fruitful mechanism for understanding Spinoza's ultimate aims and conclusions.

However, there is an upshot of the style, which is that it generates targeted chains of reasoning which, if focused, can generate powerful, complex, coherent, systematic propositions. If this style is carefully followed, then there is a sense in which it helps us

abide by M1-M3, so long as we do not introduce anything besides good definitions and axioms, we are within the bounds of our understanding, and can avoid wearying our minds. The unity of method uncovered in Spinoza's methodology and his philosophy of language and Nature, applies equally to understanding human Affects, the essence of which is desire, born out in particular bodily motions and corresponding ideas. By following the Euclidean order of the text of the *Ethics* carefully, Spinoza's focus on Necessity and Hate is illuminated in Chapter 5. These tandem concerns, at the heart of his ethical thinking, raise serious questions concerning the tenability of his philosophy, which seems to push us toward nihilism, and yet also seems to recommend highly moralistic principles for both individuals and states that suggest Spinoza does not think his views render ethics and politics pointless.

These questions are considered in Chapter 6. There, I cannot hope to have resolved things once and for all, but in placing questions of nihilism and purpose, morality and politics, squarely in the domain of Spinoza's method, and having illuminated this method in my own idiosyncratic, but perhaps novel and useful, manner, I hope to have opened up a space to reconsider the value of Spinoza's philosophy, both insofar as it may be true, and insofar as things might go better if we can find a way to follow through on at least some of its best parts.

All of these things seem to have in common that they rest on Spinoza's commitment to monism, necessitarianism, and immanent efficient causation. In this dissertation, the relationship between method and these basic commitments is reinforced. The method can be understood as a sort of metaprinciple for activity that can guide us safely through the gauntlet of Spinoza's unremitting pursuit of a true philosophy. This true philosophy, far from being a relic of another time, confronts us today with both

the promise of a science of human nature and a threat to destroy many of the idols of our collective experience. In his dual insistence on the absolute disutility of Hate, and the absolute utility of a certain eternal kind of Joy, Spinoza holds out with one hand the hope of a better future, while with the other hand he—inadvertently—raises up a fear that this is actually impossible.

Spinoza's philosophy is at once alien, terrifying, cold, and threatening. It is also cheerful, warm, and comforting. It sometimes comes closer to our ordinary experience than we would like to admit. If we wish for the universe to be fully open to philosophical investigation, we may lose sight of the meaning and purpose of everything we once valued, including philosophy itself. The threat of nihilism is all-consuming. But there is something in it that is seductive, even if elusive. The potential ramifications for philosophy as a way of investigating nature and a way to live a good life are too important to let go. If we are limited by our place in the unfolding of the necessity of Nature, perforce we are also limited by what we are, and by whom we are surrounded.

We do not know how the future will go. We necessarily strive to understand everything within our power, not to Hate, pursue the truth as far as possible without fear, and to combine our powers whenever we can. In this way, necessity permitting, we can discover that we never lost what is truly valuable. It was in us all along.

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Appendix A

The Sixty-Eight Theses

Below is the complete list of propositions treated in Chapter 5.

- C1: The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it. (1P9)
- C2: It follows, secondly, that God is a cause through himself and not an accidental cause. (1P16c2)
- C3: It follows, thirdly, that God is absolutely the first cause. (1P16c3)
- C4: From this it follows, first, that there is no cause, either extrinsically or intrinsically, which prompts God to action, except the perfection of his nature. (1P17c1)
- C5: God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things. (1P18)
- C6: From this it follows, first, that God's existence, like his essence, is an eternal truth. (1P20c1)
- C7: The actual intellect, whether finite or infinite, like will, desire, love, etc., must be referred to *Natura naturata*, not to *Natura naturans*. (1P31)
- C8: Extension is an attribute of God, or God is an extended thing. (2P2)
- C9: God's idea, from which infinitely many things follow in infinitely many modes, must be unique. (2P4)
- C10: The formal being of ideas admits God as a cause only insofar as he is considered as a thinking thing, and not insofar as he is explained by any other attribute. I.e., ideas, both of God's attributes and of singular things, admit not the objects themselves, or the things perceived, as their efficient cause, but God himself, insofar as he is a thinking thing. (2P5)

- C11: 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. (2L3c)
- C12: Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct ideas. (2P36)
- C13: Knowledge of the second and third kinds, and not of the first kind, teaches us to distinguish the true from the false. (2P42)
- C14: From this it follows that it depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent, both in respect to the past and in respect to the future. (2P44c1)
- C15: The will and the intellect are one and the same. (2P49c)
- C16: From this it follows that the Mind is more liable to passions the more it has inadequate ideas, and conversely, is more active the more it has adequate ideas. (3P1c)
- C17: We cannot hate a thing we pity from the fact that its suffering affects us with Sadness. (3P27c2)
- C18: Therefore, if the lover has found that one of those circumstances is lacking, he will be saddened. (3P36c)
- C19: If someone begins to hate a thing he has loved, so that the Love is completely destroyed, then (from an equal cause) he will have a greater hate for it than if he had never loved it, and this hate will be the greater as the Love before was greater. (3P38)
- C20: He who imagines one he loves to be affected with hate toward him will be tormented by Love and Hate together. For insofar as he imagines that [the one he loves] hates him, he is determined to hate [that person] in return (by P40). But (by hypothesis) he nevertheless loves him. So he will be tormented by Love and Hate together. (3P40c1)
- C21: He who imagines he is loved by one he hates will be torn by Hate and Love together. This is demonstrated in the same way as P40C1. (3P41c)
- C22: If someone imagines that someone like himself is affected with Hate toward a thing like himself which he loves, he will hate that [person]. (3P45)

- C23: If someone has been affected with Joy or Sadness by someone of a class, or nation, different from his own, and this Joy or Sadness is accompanied by the idea of that person as its cause, under the universal name of the class or nation, he will love or hate, not only that person, but everyone of the same class or nation. (3P46)
- C24: Anything whatever can be the accidental cause of Hope or Fear. (3P50)
- C25: But perhaps this doubt remains—that not infrequently we admire and venerate men’s virtues. To remove this scruple, I shall add the following Corollary.
Cor.: No one envies another’s virtue unless he is an equal. (3P55sc)¹
- C26: We are acted on, insofar as we are a part of Nature, which cannot be conceived through itself, without the others. (4P2)
- C27: An affect, insofar as it is related to the Mind, can neither be restrained nor taken away except by the idea of an opposite affection of the Body stronger than the affection through which it is acted on. (4P7c)
- C28: An affect toward a contingent thing which we know does not exist in the present is milder, other things equal, than an affect toward a past thing. (4P13)
- C29: No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered as an affect. (4P14)
- C30: Insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to agree in nature. (4P32)
- C31: When each man most seeks his own advantage for himself, then men are most useful to one another. (4P35c2)
- C32: Things which are of assistance to the common Society of men, or which bring it about that men live harmoniously, are useful; those, on the other hand, are evil which bring discord to the State. (4P40)
- C33: Cheerfulness cannot be excessive, but is always good; Melancholy, on the other hand, is always evil. (4P42)
- C34: Whatever we want because we have been affected with hate is dishonorable; and [if we live] in a State, it is unjust. This too is evident from IIP39, and from the Definitions of dishonorable and unjust (see P37S). (4P45c2)

1. Here, ‘sc’ refers to the corollary following the scholium of 3P55. Such idiosyncratic short-forms are sometimes necessary because there are cases where there is a corollary both prior to and following a scholium or other sub-element under the same proposition, but neither are officially numbered.

- C35: Affects of Hope and Fear cannot be good of themselves. (4P47)
- C36: Affects of Overestimation and Scorn are always evil. (4P48)
- C37: Overestimation easily makes the man who is overestimated proud. (4P49)
- C38: From this it follows that man who lives according to the dictate of reason, strives, as far as he can, not to be touched by pity. (4P50c)
- C39: Favor is not contrary to reason, but can agree with it and arise from it. (4P51)
- C40: Humility is not a virtue, or does not arise from reason. (4P53)
- C41: Repentance is not a virtue, or does not arise from reason; instead, he who repents what he has done is twice wretched, or lacking in power. (4P54)
- C42: Either very great Pride or very great Despondency indicates very great weakness of mind. (4P56)
- C43: From this it follows very clearly that the proud and the despondent are highly liable to affects. (4P56c)
- C44: The proud man loves the presence of parasites, or flatterers, but hates the presence of the noble. (4P57)
- C45: Love of esteem is not contrary to reason, but can arise from it. (4P58)
- C46: A Desire arising from either a Joy or a Sadness related to one, or several, but not to all parts of the Body, has no regard for the advantage of the whole man. (4P60)
- C47: From the guidance of reason, we shall want a lesser present evil which is the cause of a greater future good, and pass over a lesser present good which is the cause of a greater future evil. This Corollary stands to P66 as P65C does to P65. (4P66c)
- C48: A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death. (4P67)
- C49: If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free. (4P68)
- C50: The virtue of a free man is seen to be as great in avoiding dangers as in overcoming them. (4P69)

- C51: In a free man, a timely flight is considered to show as much Tenacity as fighting; or a free man chooses flight with the same Tenacity, or presence of mind, as he chooses a contest. (4P69c)
- C52: A free man who lives among the ignorant strives, as far as he can, to avoid their favors. (4P70)
- C53: Only free men are very thankful to one another. (4P71)
- C54: A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively. (4P72)
- C55: A man who is guided by reason is more free in a state, where he lives according to a common decision, than in solitude, where he obeys only himself. (4P73)
- C56: From this it follows that there is no affect of which we cannot form some clear and distinct concept. For an affect is an idea of an affection of the Body (by Gen. Def. Aff.), which therefore (by P4) must involve some clear and distinct concept. (5P4c)
- C57: Love toward God cannot be turned into hate. (5P18c)
- C58: He who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return. (5P19)
- C59: This Love toward God cannot be tainted by an affect of Envy or Jealousy: instead, the more men we imagine to be joined to God by the same bond of Love, the more it is encouraged. (5P20)
- C60: The more the Mind is capable of understanding things by the third kind of knowledge, the more it desires to understand them by this kind of knowledge. (5P26)
- C61: The Striving, or Desire, to know things by the third kind of knowledge cannot arise from the first kind of knowledge, but can indeed arise from the second. (5P28)
- C62: Only while the Body endures is the Mind subject to affects which are related to the passions. (5P34)
- C63: From this it follows that no Love except intellectual Love is eternal. (5P34c)
- C64: From this it follows that insofar as God loves himself, he loves men, and consequently that God's love of men and the Mind's intellectual Love of God are one and the same. (5P36c)

C65: He who has a Body capable of a great many things has a Mind whose greatest part is eternal. (5P39)

C66: From this it follows that the part of the Mind that remains, however great it is, is more perfect than the rest.

For the eternal part of the Mind (by P23 and P29) is the intellect, through which alone we are said to act (by IIIP3). But what we have shown to perish is the imagination (by P21), through which alone we are said to be acted on (by IIIP3 and the gen. Def. Aff.). So (by P40), the intellect, however extensive it is, is more perfect than the imagination, q.e.d. (5P40c)

C67: Even if we did not know that our Mind is eternal, we would still regard as of the first importance Morality, Religion, and absolutely all the things we have shown (in Part IV) to be related to Tenacity and Nobility. (5P41)

C68: Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; nor do we enjoy it because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to restrain them. (5P42)