

THE ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION:
INTERPRETING THE PARADOXICAL SINGULARITY OF SPINOZA'S ONTOLOGICAL
ARGUMENT

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN SOCIAL & POLITICAL THOUGHT
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

May 2023

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I interpret Spinoza's ontological argument to mean that the partiality of a part (mode) cannot be conceived except within the context of a whole (substance) in which it participates. Yet, insofar as a modified part (in-another) has a true idea of its own modified partiality, then that idea, and whatever follows from it, must be as irreducibly whole (in-itself) as the substantial whole in which it participates. This constitutes what I describe as the paradox of singularity in Spinoza's thought because it establishes an ontology in which singular things are singularized or differentiated through an intersection of causes that must be conceived either in-themselves, in-another, or both at once.

Given Spinoza's (in)famous concept of absolutely infinite substance, the role and function of individuality and individuation in his philosophy has been a popular subject of dispute in the 20th century secondary literature. Some authors have sought to portray Spinoza as a champion of an untethered individualism, whereas others have emphasized the collectivistic bonds that bind individuals together in cooperative endeavors. Most productively, recent scholars have presented Spinoza as a thinker of what they call *transindividuality*. Spinoza, however, never used the term *transindividuality* in his writings, but he did employ two interrelated concepts of *singularity* (*res singulares*) which I thus argue should be described instead as *paradoxical singularity*. Many of the proponents of Spinoza's *transindividualism*, or what I call *paradoxical singularity*, have overlooked the way in which his views on individuality and collectivity follows from the paradoxical logic with which Spinoza claims to know of the necessary existence of God. For this reason, few have understood how or why Spinoza's ontological argument facilitates the non-ancillary adequacy between religion and philosophy as equivalent expressions of this immanent certainty. I therefore demonstrate how Spinoza's ontological argument offers a paradoxical logic with which to identify, relate, and interpret universality and particularity.

I argue that Spinoza's ontological argument for the necessary existence of God constitutes a theory of action, way of being, or an *ethos* in which philosophy and religion are functionally identical. Yet, given the paradox of singularity that it involves, participation in this *ethos* presupposes a power of interpretation from which and for which individuals of a compatible nature strive to persevere in their being together.

In Loving Memory of Elijah Durnford.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge those whose support, friendship, and guidance have been invaluable to me in the production of this dissertation. I owe a great debt to Dr. Brayton Polka, without whom the interpretive significance of the ontological argument in European philosophy, especially as it relates to Spinoza, might have been forever beyond my grasp. I offer my deepest thanks to Dr. Polka for the rigor of his pedagogy and for the contagious earnestness of his Spirit. I have enormous gratitude for my graduate supervisors Dr. Walid El Kachab, Dr. Stanley Tweyman, and Dr. Joseph Gonda. I thank Dr. Walid El Kachab especially for the profound kindness with which he approaches his work and the confidence he has inspired in me. The interdisciplinary approach of my dissertation would not have been possible without the academic breadth of his guidance. I thank Dr. Stanley Tweyman for his constant support of my project in all areas ranging from the academic to the administrative. Dr. Tweyman's works on Descartes have been particularly instructive for my understanding of the common philosophical project between Descartes and Spinoza. Thank you to Dr. Joseph Gonda who stepped onto my committee during challenging circumstances, and whose expertise has been an excellent resource. Thank you to the community of scholars who have generously spent their time with me over the years and have, as a result, deeply influenced my thinking like Dr. Avron Kulak and Dr. Jim Vernon. I am especially grateful to Dr. Steve Bailey and Dr. Willi Goetschel for serving as examiners for the defense of this dissertation.

Underlying and supporting all of these scholars with whom I have been so privileged to work and study are the amazing administrators who facilitated the necessary and often difficult conditions for the completion of this dissertation. In particular, I would like to thank Judith Hawley for the unbelievable tenacity of her work ethic and the compassion she has for the Social

& Political Thought graduate community. I am also grateful to graduate program directors of Social & Political Thought Dr. Eve Haque and Dr. Gamal Abdel-Shehid. Both Dr. Haque and Dr. Abdel-Shehid introduced me to ideas and scholars that would prove indispensable to the ideas and efforts involved in this dissertation.

To my family, your endless well of moral support and encouragement has sustained me during challenging times. Corey Gardner, Daniel Korn, Tal Davidson, Sam Birnbaum, and Adam Borenstein, thank you for your endless solidarity in friendship. Elijah will be with us always.

Finally, but *far* from lastly, I thank my partner Kristina Borg whose love and efforts have sustained me on the best and worst of days. As if that was not enough, her help with editing the drafts of this dissertation from beginning to end was absolutely indispensable, she offered me insightful questions and comments without which this study surely would have suffered.

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Note Concerning References to Spinoza's Texts

Unless specifically noted otherwise, all references to, and quotations from, Spinoza's writings are taken from Edwin Curley's two volumes of *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, of which Prof. Curley is also the translator and editor. When citing passages from texts other than the *Ethics*, I shall provide the chapter and paragraph number. I make an effort in my quotations of Spinoza's texts to correct for gendered language where possible without obscuring Spinoza's original meaning. See note 54 of this study for an explanation of this approach.

Titles shall be abbreviated as follows:

E	<i>Ethics</i>
TPT	<i>Theological-Political Treatise</i>
TEI	<i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i>
ST	<i>Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being</i>
PT	<i>Political Treatise</i>
PDP	<i>Principles of Descartes' Philosophy</i>
MT	<i>Metaphysical Thoughts</i>
NS	<i>De Nagelate Schriften van B.D.S.</i> (Dutch translations)
L	<i>Letters</i>

The *Ethics* citations shall be abbreviated as follows:

A	Axiom
D	Definition
P	Proposition
Schol.	Scholium
Cor.	Corollary
L	Lemma
Dem.	Demonstration
Post.	Postulate
DA	Definition of the affects of Part III.

EIIP47S, for example, refers to the scholium of the *Ethics* part two, proposition forty-seven, whereas TPT 20.12 refers to chapter twenty, paragraph twelve of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Chapter One

Introduction

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected – whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.

– Spinoza, TEI.1

The thesis of this dissertation is that Spinoza's ontological argument makes it impossible to understand the singular essence of actually existing things on the basis of a separation that would alienate things (modes) from the particular determinations in which they exist. I argue that there is a paradox involved in this ontology, one that allows Spinoza to overcome the hierarchical divisions that have haunted European philosophy from its earliest traces. Not only does the unfolding of this paradox escape the binary logic of conventional hierarchies, it is also the principle of his philosophy of freedom. Spinoza thus does not treat this paradox as a philosophical error in need of correction because to discard it would be to discard the principle of his idea of freedom as well. Instead, the paradox serves as the focus of a simultaneously religious, philosophical, and political aporia, the personal and collective interpretation of which is expressed as an *ethic*. It is this refusal of separation and dichotomy (of the theoretical from the practical, the universal from the particular, the mind from the body, the metaphysical from the political, etc.) that makes Spinoza so important to modern thought.

The paradox of Spinoza's ontological argument, as I interpret it, is this: the partiality of a part cannot be conceived outside of or without the idea of the whole in which it participates.

However, if a part had a true idea of its own partiality, then that idea would have to be as irreducibly whole as the whole in which it participates and yet obviously does not resemble. Spinoza's ontological argument thus challenges us to conceive singular things as simultaneously singular and plural. This is both because the properties that singularize or differentiate something as unique only make sense in a pluralistic context, but also because the existence of singular things is sustained by the multiplicities that inhabit them and that they in turn inhabit. Thus, the paradox of Spinoza's ontological argument is that singular things become or *transition* into what they essentially are through the dynamic compatibility of the intrinsic and extrinsic relations that sustain them. Insofar as this essential transition or coming into being is understood to constitute the good for which individual things strive, I argue that Spinoza's political ontology should be understood as an ethics of interpretation. For, if the individuality of things changes depending on the multiplicities that compose and dissolve them, then the essence of a singular thing is identical to an ethics of compatible relations that preserve its existence. But if individuals are dynamically constructed through an amalgam of agreements and disagreements, then the good of the individual is to maximize its relations to things that agree with it and to minimize those that do not. Yet, if the individual changes with the contexts that it inhabits and that equally inhabit it, then the good of that individual must be as dynamic and changeable as the individual itself. Thus, I argue that the good that Spinoza conceives to be identical with existence itself cannot be conceived or realized without an ethics of interpretation in light of which singular things strive to become what they are through their relations to others. The paradox of Spinoza's ontological argument then is that each existing thing is always already perfect, lacking nothing of its essential being, and yet it is *still* to be perfected.

My emphasis on the paradoxical unity of monism and pluralism in Spinoza's philosophy is not particularly novel, many authors have written on this subject before. Surprisingly, however, there tends to be very little communication between the various schools and disciplinary off-shoots of Spinoza studies. Instead, many authors seem to prefer engaging predominantly with others of their own disciplinary inclination and end up fracturing Spinoza studies into distinct branches. While this may be, to some degree, an inevitable effect of academic specialization, it has had the undesirable consequence of insulating and obscuring deeply compatible insights and approaches whose connections have gone unexplored. To this extent, the specific contribution that my study offers the literature is twofold: on the one hand, I seek to bring diverse corners of Spinoza studies into dialogue, and, on the other hand, I situate Spinoza's paradox of singularity in his interpretation of the ontological argument for the necessary existence of God. Thus, with the exception of some remarkable scholars whose studies employ a different focus than my own,¹ few have explored how Spinoza's theory of interpretation relates to his use of the ontological argument, and those who have do not connect their insights to the question of Spinoza's transindividuality. Without sufficient attention to Spinoza's theory of interpretation, readers are liable to misunderstand his ideas through hierarchical relations that separate and undermine the paradoxical unities on which his philosophy is based. Some have sought to use Spinoza's thinking to champion the ideals of an untethered individualism, whereas others have emphasized a collectivism in which individuality is absorbed in the context of totality. My dissertation aims to fill this gap in the literature.

¹ See, for example: Berel Lang, "The Politics of Interpretation: Spinoza's Modernist Turn," *The Review of Metaphysics* 43, no.2. (Dec., 1989), 327–56; Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press), 2004; and Brayton Polka, *Between Philosophy & Religion*, Volumes I & II (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books), 2007.

a. Transindividuality and the Paradox of Singularity

In this opening section of my dissertation, I introduce the idea of paradoxical singularity as it relates to twentieth century Spinoza scholarship and offer a brief review of its literature. What I mean by paradoxical singularity is what recent scholarship – at its best, and by post-structuralist authors in particular – tends to call *transindividuality*. The term was coined by the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon who used the idea to challenge conventional binaries between individuality and collectivity and to put in their place an understanding of their mutually presupposing constitution.² Transindividuality, as Simondon conceives it, is not a compromise, a middle term, between either end of the duality. It is an idea that conceives the systemic relations and connections between things in such a way that denies any attempt to oppose or separate parts from wholes and wholes from parts. Transindividuality is thus a concept that can be used to understand and interpret the complex interactions that facilitate individual and collective identities or “essences” not only in ways that are unopposed but that are mutually implicating and co-constituting.

Of course, the subtitle of my dissertation does not include the term *transindividuality*, I use in its place the term *paradoxical singularity*. There are two primary reasons why I prefer the term *paradoxical singularity* to characterize Spinoza’s thinking rather than *transindividuality*. First, this difference in terminology signals a difference in my interpretation and application of its concept. So, on the one hand, the difference is simply one of jargon, but on the other hand, the conceptual implications of the jargon are what are at stake. Second, while Spinoza does not use the term transindividuality anywhere in his writings, he does employ two interrelated notions of

² Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective à la lumière des notions de forme, information, potentiel et métastabilité* (Paris: Aubier, 1989).

singularity in the *Ethics*, both expressing forms of multiplicity that relate to his concept of God as an absolutely infinite substance. Thus, the difference of my approach is to understand the paradox of singularity – or what others have termed transindividuality – as it relates to Spinoza’s ontological argument for the necessary existence of God.³ Accordingly, Spinoza argues that the essence of things can be conceived in one of two ways: “We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature.”⁴ But, on the one hand, if we opt for the former and conceive the singularity of things as they relate to “a certain time and place,” then each thing will be defined through an infinite regress of causes. This is a problem for Spinoza, as we will see, because it means that each thing is defined negatively through what it is not. But it is also a problem because the infinite regress of spatiotemporal causes means that the standard through which we conceive things is rooted in a principle standard of which we are fundamentally ignorant. On the other hand, if we conceive the singularity of things as they relate to and follow from a non-regressive principle like in the way Spinoza defines the divine nature of God, then how shall we distinguish those things from that nature while preserving the singularity that defines them? Thus, by *paradox of singularity* I understand (with Spinoza) the simultaneity in which diverse things exist in and through multiple and dynamic orders of causality in which their essence transitions between more or less “perfection.” Hence, the singularity to which I refer is not a “oneness” that remains continuous in every context. Instead, the singularity to which I refer is a “uniqueness”

³ “Whatever is, is either in itself or in another.” EIA1.

⁴ EVP29schol.

which is defined or interpreted according to the orders of multiplicity in which a singular thing participates.

Transindividuality or paradoxical of singularity is a valuable concept to understand because the history of modern thought can be characterized by a division and opposition between individualistic and collectivistic perspectives on religion, politics, and social relations. The individualistic perspectives tend to view general categories like “society” or “humanity” with a skepticism that assumes them to be extrapolated from individual actions and choices. The collectivists, on the other hand, tend to view the whole with a dogmatic reverence that elevates it as something prior to and which ought to be therefore the priority of its individual parts. In the domain of religion this duality falls along the atheist/theist or secular/orthodox divide, in politics along the right/left wing divide, and in individual social relations along an egoist/altruist divide. Yet insofar as these dualities persist, each side will be oblivious to the ways in which it is determined by its opposite. For, both individualism and collectivism are contradicted in exactly the same conditions since it is impossible to suppress individual powers and freedoms without at the same time diminishing the powers and freedoms of a whole, and vice versa.

The value of transindividuality or paradoxical singularity is not simply limited to an ethical or political point of view. The concept essentially involves theories of causality, action, and practice according to which the power of particular things to affect and be affected is determined by the kinds of relations that they are capable of forming with themselves and others. I will argue that this provides an absolute standard from which to understand the interconnections and distinctions between natural causality and human freedom. Unlike natural causality in which singular things are subject to infinite regressions that separate cause(s) and effects, Spinoza’s idea of human freedom refers to an immanent mode of causality that exists in

and through its practical effects. Human freedom as such thus does not exist outside of or somehow without natural determination but also cannot be understood on that basis alone. Thus, conventional oppositions between transcendence/immanence, freewill/natural determination, etc., simply do not apply to Spinoza's transindividual thinking. For, the transindividual notion of causality identifies singular things through an intersection of causes that are either "in-themselves" or "in-another." In this way, the ontological schema of transindividualism emphasizes a singular and yet combinatorial nature in every causal relation such that each thing involves causes that are at once transcendent and immanent, determined and free.

Transindividuality is thus a concept worth exploring in the fields of politics and ontology, but Spinoza does not use the term in his writings, so it may not be immediately clear what one has to do with the other. After all, Simondon, who coined the term, had a typically superficial reading of Spinoza's philosophy as reflecting a kind of pantheism in which individual things are reduced to mere parts of an all-encompassing nature or substance. Most recently, however, scholars like Etienne Balibar and Hasana Sharp have applied the idea to Spinoza's writings to find its conceptual underpinnings already at work in Spinoza's greatest ideas.⁵ As we shall see, Spinoza is a philosopher of transindividualism to the extent that he offers an ontology of mutually interpretive relations that are in and of themselves political insofar as each singular thing is conceived to either persevere in or be destroyed by a constituted multiplicity. On this point, however, the continental and the Anglo-American school of thought depart on their readings of Spinoza. Anglo-American commentators have traditionally separated the *Ethics* from Spinoza's other works and studied it mainly for its metaphysical and epistemological content

⁵ Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza, the Transindividual*, trans. Mark G.E Kelly (2018; reis., Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza & Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (1985; reis., London: Verso, 2008); Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza & the Politics of Renaturalization* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

while hardly engaging the *Theological Political Treatise*, and *Political Treatise*, let alone raising the question of their relationship. The Spinozist notion of transindividuality is distinctly continental then to the extent that Spinoza scholarship in continental Europe tends to display an appreciation for the interconnections between the ontological and the political, while the Anglo-American typically does not. Nonetheless, the thesis that Spinoza paradoxically relates “the one and the many” is not limited to authors who use the terminology of transindividuality, regardless of which traditions they mainly draw from. I will therefore examine the literature of 20th century Spinoza studies as it relates to transindividuality and I will conclude my review with Sharp and Balibar who explicitly apply the term to Spinoza and are the most recent contributors to the subject. Although I will begin with the earliest and conclude with the most recent (at the time of writing), I will not otherwise proceed chronologically but as I judge most relevant to the subject at hand.

Pierre Macherey’s 1996 article, “The Encounter with Spinoza,” provides a valuable context with which to situate the revival of Spinoza studies in continental Europe.⁶ Macherey points to a coincidence in French scholarship in the late 1960’s when Martial Gu eroult, Gilles Deleuze, and Alexandre Matheron each published highly influential works on Spinoza that displayed shared concerns and approaches. Macherey argues that all three of these scholars shared a common ground by finding in Spinoza a refuge from the catastrophe of 20th century political regimes and their respective state philosophies. For this reason, they tended to emphasize what they regarded as the anti-Cartesian and anti-Hegelian elements of Spinoza’s thought since they considered these two thinkers in particular to be the culprits of the modern

⁶ Pierre Macherey, “The Encounter with Spinoza,” in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 139–61.

philosophical failure. What Spinoza offered each of these French scholars so critical of the modern situation was a radical critique of subjectivity and final-causes. Contrary to what they viewed as the superficial and monolithic ego of the Cartesian cogito and the anthropocentric finalism of Hegel's dialectic of spirit, Spinoza seemed to offer the humble alternative that subjectivity is necessarily relational, and that human freedom is not the ultimate end of an otherwise indifferent Nature. However, the skeptical agenda with which these French authors studied Spinoza has had vestigial effects in continental Spinoza studies, some of which are useful, while others have obscured important connections that in fact ally Spinoza with many of his would-be aggressors.

In *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1968) Deleuze makes central to his project the construction of a purely affirmative metaphysic that does not rely on what he perceived to be the anthropocentric flaws of Hegel's dialectics to resolve the differential problems of philosophy.⁷ Thus, when Deleuze turns to Spinoza as his champion he redeploys Spinoza's thought within his philosophical agenda he omits productive operations in Spinoza's thinking that although dialectical are not anthropocentric. However contentious some scholars have found Deleuze's work on Spinoza to be, others have adopted it virtually unchallenged. For example, Simon Duffy's *The Logic of Expression: Quality, Quantity, and Intensity in Spinoza, Hegel, and Deleuze* (2006),⁸ is predominantly occupied with the mathematical and geometrical functions of expressionism as the basis for Deleuze's differential calculus. Duffy never seems to question what constitutes the singularity of human expression or whether math and geometry are adequate tools with which to interpret such a thing. Similarly, in *Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and*

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1968; reis., New York: Zone Books, 1990).

⁸ Simon Duffy, *The Logic of Expression: Quality, Quantity, and Intensity in Spinoza, Hegel, and Deleuze* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006).

Negativity (2017) Gregor Moder accepts Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza without challenge or recourse to other interpretations but simply accepts the conflict with Hegel's dialectical thinking and pursues its implications.⁹ Pierre Macherey, on the other hand, in *Hegel or Spinoza* (1979) critically investigates the nature of this apparent opposition and although he finds many points of divergence between the two philosophers, he also finds a number of areas of resonance and convergence.¹⁰ As such, Macherey argues that the alternative between dialectical thinking and Spinoza's own logic is not as great as Deleuze had presented it. Contrary to Deleuze's opposition and in line with thinkers like Macherey, Balibar, and Polka, I employ a dialectical reading of Spinoza's philosophy. Balibar and Polka, in particular, show that without a dialectical approach that negotiates the contradictions of mutually presupposed terms through a historical or political process – such as those between the private/public, individual/collective, or inner-obedience/outer-obedience – hierarchy will inevitably ensue and the radical freedom that Spinoza proposes will ultimately be undone.¹¹ Although Spinoza's theory of the attributes of substance is not conceived dialectically since they do not relate negatively, this does not exclude or prohibit dialectical relations among the modes of the attributes themselves. If we consider dialectical ways of thinking to be a merely human way of apprehending the Absolute, as Deleuze does, we will inevitably view interpretation as an inferior form of knowledge since interpretation is an inherently dialectical or dialogical form of thinking.

⁹ Gregor Moder, *Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and Negativity* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan Ruddick (1979; reis., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

¹¹ Balibar, *Spinoza, the Transindividual; Spinoza & Politics*; Brayton Polka, *Between Philosophy & Religion, Volumes I and II* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2007).

Deleuze was one of the earliest post-structuralist authors to emphasize a paradoxical unity of the one and the many in Spinoza. Despite the controversy of his approach, the concept of “expressionism” that his study offers is actually very useful for understanding the transindividuality of Spinoza’s philosophy. However, the problem that confronts a reader of *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* insofar as they seek to understand Spinoza is, ironically, the high degree of interpretation that his work on Spinoza requires. For, the primary concept that Deleuze explores in his text on Spinoza is what he calls “expression,” but this word is virtually absent from Spinoza’s texts. The focus of Deleuze’s study is Spinoza’s *Ethics* and in an examination of its Latin, Macherey notes that “the noun *expressio* does not once occur and the idea of expression is suggested only through the use of the verb *exprimere*, which occurs in various forms (*expressa*, *exprimatur*, *exprimere*, *exprimerem*, *exprimet*, *exprimit*, *exprimunt*, *exprimuntur*) altogether forty-six times in the *Ethics*.”¹² Due to the obscurity of the term, let alone its concept, Deleuze ultimately had to import many ideas from Neoplatonic and Medieval philosophers and read them into Spinoza’s thinking. To Deleuze’s credit, however, he was not the only one to attend to this idea of expression in Spinoza and to explain it through medieval scholasticism. Fritz Kaufmann, for example, wrote an article in 1940 titled “Spinoza’s System as a Theory of Expression” that also claims to find in Spinoza an emanative logic called expression which he uses to explain Spinoza’s mutually philosophical and artistic appeal.¹³ However, Kaufmann also had to import many of his ideas from Neoplatonic and Stoic thinkers, which I argue obfuscates more of Spinoza’s philosophy than it clarifies.

¹² Macherey, “The Encounter with Spinoza,” 144.

¹³ Fritz Kaufmann, “Spinoza’s System as Theory of Expression,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1, no. 1 (September 1940): 83–97.

What then does Deleuze contribute to an understanding of Spinoza's philosophy given the controversial nature of his approach? It is simply the principle he finds in expressionism itself, namely that what is expressed (the One) cannot exist independently of its expressions (the many), and yet they do not resemble each other. "The paradox is that 'what is expressed' has no existence outside its expression, yet bears no resemblance to it, but relates *essentially* to what expresses itself as distinct from the expression itself."¹⁴ The idea of expressionism can thus be used as a rule for conceiving the ways in which differences are necessarily related without thereby neutralizing that initial difference. What can, in the right context, be fruitful about a theory of expression then is that it seeks to understand the interconnections between ontology (what is), epistemology (what we know), and politics (what we do). So, as will become evident in later chapters, the value of Deleuze's theory of expression, contrary to his declared intentions, derives from its proximity to the ontological argument for the existence of God as it functions in Spinoza. For, the ontological argument posits that there is one thing that cannot be conceived without necessarily existing, and that is the idea of God. The ontological argument thereby expresses a paradoxical unity between God, as *causa-sui*, and the thinker whose idea of God expresses their own transition to infinitely greater perfection. In other words, the expressed does not exist outside of the expression and yet they do not resemble each other: the thinker is not God and God is not the thinker.

Deleuze's work on Spinoza often exhibits a preoccupation with Spinoza's ontology at the expense of an attention to his political writings, but Alexandre Matheron's overt Marxism in *Individu et communauté* (1969) compensates for this imbalance. Matheron's primary aim in the work is to argue that Spinoza's thinking involves a politics of "disalienation" in which the

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 333.

immanent end, goal and condition of politics is a total “communism of minds” such that a community or state becomes “conscious of itself” in its essentially singular nature.¹⁵ Thus, there is a clear sense of transindividuality at work in Matheron’s general project since his very concept of political sovereignty involves a disalienation of self and neighbour. Where Matheron’s thesis becomes problematic, however, is in his discussion of the foundation of human passions. Matheron argues that the socio-political function and value of affective imitation for Spinoza derives from the human “ambition for glory.” According to Matheron, this universally human affection inspires particular individuals to conform to and emulate their fellows in order to accomplish and embody what they may imagine pleases them. It is in the affect of ambition, Matheron argues, that the very foundations of sociability are discovered not in utilitarian instrumentality or in altruistic self-sacrifice but in the reciprocity of joy. He writes:

If we want to please men, it is not to be able to use them later; this will happen, of course, but secondarily. And nonetheless this ambition is not ‘altruistic’ in the Comtean sense either. It is located beneath these alternatives, in an original locus where egoism and ‘altruism’ coincide: to rejoice, without utilitarian thought, in the joy that I give to my fellows is the *same thing* as to love myself through the love they show me.¹⁶

Despite the insight that Matheron displays at the end of this passage which we will find very much applies to Spinoza’s notion of the Good that follows from an “intellectual love of God,” Matheron does not seem to acknowledge the problem of sourcing Spinoza’s concept of activity (action) in that of passivity (passion). Spinoza is careful never to argue that human freedom is

¹⁵ Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 612–13, qtd. in Balibar, *Spinoza, the Transindividual*, 41–42.

¹⁶ Matheron, *Individu et communauté*, 164.

constituted by the transition from bondage to perfection, but only *from perfection to greater* perfection. The paradox is that freedom, for Spinoza, can only be effectuated from the conditions of freedom itself. We will see in later chapters that we can, in a sense, retain what Matheron calls “rational imitation” as an ethic that follows from Spinoza’s interpretive notion of “accommodation,” but this will in no way correspond to the passive notion of affective imitation found in part three of the *Ethics*. When considering Spinoza’s thoughts on imitation, however, it is important to keep in mind Spinoza’s critique in the *Theological-Political Treatise* of demagogical theologians who aspire to be glorified and venerated by the crowds to whom they preach by mirroring and parroting their passions back at them.

In opposition to Matheron’s views on Spinoza, the Anglo-American scholar Lee Rice is critical of what he considers to be Matheron’s dogmatism. Rice prefers a more liberalistic individualism compared to Matheron’s collectivistically inclined reading of Spinoza and argues that the entire premise of a “body-politic” in Spinoza is a false or “literal” extrapolation of the very brief sketch of a theory of simple and compound bodies presented in the *Ethics* after Part II, Proposition 13.¹⁷ Rice argues that interpreters like Matheron wrongly project Spinoza’s naturalistic principles onto socio-political functions and as a result obscure the actual role of individuation in Spinoza’s thinking as the mere absorption of parts into ever increasing levels of complexity. Rice thus seeks to rescue Spinoza from these perceived abuses and to present him as a philosopher of radical individualism. The political collectives that Spinoza is concerned with, according to Rice, simply compound from the temporary utility afforded by their union but which dissolves as soon as the temporary utility is exhausted. Therefore, he argues, that states or

¹⁷ Lee Rice, “Individual and community in Spinoza’s social psychology,” in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions, The Proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference, 1986*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 271–85.

collectives are not true individuals but only quasi “individuals” that result from a fleeting coincidence of interest. I argue, however, that the skeptical individualism advanced by Rice is not a tenable alternative to what he views as Matheron’s dogmatism. Contrary to Rice’s interpretation, I argue that Spinoza’s axiom regarding singular things in nature clearly involves the relative weakness of human beings to endure, let alone find utility, in socio-political isolation.¹⁸ Therefore, I consider it unlikely that Spinoza would view the function of the state so instrumentally when it is clearly associated with the necessities of self-preservation (conatus) which is always an end in-itself. Spinoza clearly affirms this when he writes in the TPT that “the purpose of the state is, in reality, freedom.”¹⁹ The state or community, therefore, as an individual of individuals, is not a merely instrumental good that services the various appetites of individual human beings, it is the good and condition of individuality itself.

Not all Anglo-American Spinoza scholars, however, share the libertarian views of Rice. Susan James, for example, in *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together* (2020) exhibits a keen awareness of the inescapable interdependence of individual things in both nature and politics.²⁰ Contrary to Rice’s emphasis on contractual individualism, James convincingly argues that “we have no real alternative to learning to live together” since our individual powers and freedoms depend on the conditions in light of which individuals cohere and cooperate as collectives.²¹ James thus does not use the language of transindividuality to explore Spinoza’s thinking but instead uses the language of cooperation and cohesion such that the power of individual things is

¹⁸ “There is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed.” EIVAI.

¹⁹ TPT 20.12.

²⁰ Susan James, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

mutually interdependent. There are thus clearly transindividual elements at work in her thinking. Even if she does not use the term, James's cooperative thesis cannot avoid engaging with Spinoza's transindividuality. Nonetheless, I am critical of two assumptions adopted by James. First, James makes significant detours through classical authors of antiquity like Cicero in her expounding of Spinoza's moral concepts and draws contrasting parallels to the Stoics. But I argue that these comparisons are not entirely helpful. If Spinoza's politics were simply a nuanced expression of Roman oligarchism or if his philosophy was simply a recapitulation of Stoicism, then Spinoza himself would ultimately fall into one of the two positions that he ascribes to Maimonides (the dogmatism of reason) and Alfakhar (the skeptical unknowability of God) in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.²² Comparing Spinoza with pre-biblical thinkers tends to reimpose a skeptical hierarchy in the relation between religion (faith/revelation) and philosophy (reason). James argues that philosophy ultimately retains the upper hand for Spinoza: "It is philosophy that holds the key to moral liberation and reveals the ultimate standards of the good against which those of theology can be measured. In moral as well as epistemological matters, it has the upper hand."²³ This conclusion follows from James' characterization of "moral certainty" as the experiential, inductive, or "imaginary" form of certainty available to theological thought.²⁴ But if this were true, then the moral certainty through which we interpret the divinity of prophets and their revelations would be as relative as any other imaginary and inductive premises. For this reason, I argue that James' approach does not fully develop the paradox of Spinoza's ontology –

²² Spinoza's critique of the skeptical and dogmatic positions that he respectively attributes to Alfakhar and Maimonides is generally exhibited all throughout the TPT but is concentrated in chapters seven "Interpreting Scripture", and fifteen "Showing that Theology should not be the [ancillary] of Reason, nor Reason the [ancillary] of Theology, and the reason which persuades us of the authority of Holy Scripture." TPT.7, TPT.15. For my interpretation of the meaning and significance of this critique see chapter 3.b "Spinoza's Interpretive Method."

²³ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

the existence of a partial (imperfect), finite, and dependent being with a whole (perfect), infinite, sovereign idea.

To return to a continental approach to interpreting Spinoza's transindividualism, we should consider the importance of Antonio Negri's sophisticated and subversive text *The Savage Anomaly* (1981).²⁵ Negri is a student of Deleuze, and his reading of Spinoza reflects the depth of this influence. Negri places a great deal of importance on the Deleuzian themes of affirmation, multiplicity, and power. Unlike Deleuze, however, Negri puts most of his focus on Spinoza's politics because he considers it to be the necessary conclusion of and condition for his metaphysics. For Negri, the entire history of political thought can be understood as the expression of and experimentation with one single idea – the self-organizing power of a multitude conscious of itself as such. Negri considers Spinoza's most important idea to be the *potentia multitudinis* (power of the multitude) into which all singularity, even substance itself, evaporates. Negri argues that power is always the expression of a multiplicity and that all multiplicity expresses a natural right or power. This means that an adequate concept of a power necessarily exceeds any condition for the representation of a unity. Hence, although for Negri the *multitudo* is nothing but “an elusive set of singularities,” it is not a mind, spirit, or subject but simply the effect of an accumulated material power or force. Thus, if Negri has an argument for the idea of transindividuality it is that “Spinozian democracy, the *omni absolutum democraticum imperium*, must be conceived as a social practice of singularities that intersect in a mass process – or better, as a *pietas* that forms and constitutes the reciprocal individual relations that stretch

²⁵ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (1981; reis., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

between the multiplicity of subjects constituting the *multitude*.”²⁶ We can see here both how Negri makes a valuable contribution to the idea of transindividuality and why Negri’s final position is too subversive to adopt. On the one hand, Negri rightly makes Spinoza’s critique of subjectivity absolutely central in a way I find very productive. Negri shows us through Spinoza that a subject is either the projected and superimposed unity of a mere representation or ultimately a power to act. Thus, the value of Negri’s contribution is to show that Spinoza’s philosophy is first and last a philosophy of praxis. However, the price that we must pay in following Negri is the adherence to a strict historical materialism that cannot in the end be considered transindividual since, for Negri, individuality is inevitably dissolved into the multiplicities of which it is composed.

Now to engage authors who explicitly use the term transindividuality in their studies of Spinoza. Hasana Sharp explicitly applied Simondon’s theory of transindividuality to Spinoza in the first chapter of *Spinoza & the Politics of Renaturalization* (2011).²⁷ Like Deleuze and Negri, Sharp displays a deep skepticism of all things anthropocentric and tends to present Spinoza as antithetical to the idealism of Kant and Hegel. Sharp aims to undo what she views as the harmful anthropocentric effects of philosophies that have sought to divorce human nature from Nature such that they conceive the human being as something separate from and above natural causes. Sharp finds in Spinoza an “ecosystem of ideas” in which each idea is necessarily connected to and caused by a vast system of other interconnected ideas.²⁸ Sharp uses this primary analogy to

²⁶ Antonio Negri, “*Reliqua desiderantur*: a Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy at the Final Spinoza,” in *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations*, ed. Timothy S. Murphy, trans. Timothy S. Murphy et al. (Manchester University Press, 2004), 45.

²⁷ Sharp, *Spinoza & the Politics of Renaturalization*, 55–84.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.

argue that, for Spinoza, human beings are like all other natural beings insofar as to exist is to be subject to the determinations of nature. Sharp argues on this basis that all natural beings are determined not by premeditated and conscious intention, but by the natural power of affects. This is not to say that Sharp seeks to conflate the particularities of human and non-human nature into one mass of post-human animalism. Rather, her aim is to argue that human existence does not occupy a unique ontological niche of its own. Due to the primacy of affects in Sharp's account of Spinoza's ontology, she argues that since Spinoza's concept of Thought excludes anthropocentric illusions of a "freewill," non-human beings are subject to the same kind of determinations that human beings are subject to.²⁹ Indeed, there seems to be good reason to think that Spinoza supports this attribution of a mind to non-humans. For, Spinoza writes that if we want "to determine what is the difference between the human mind and the others, and how it surpasses them, it is necessary for us, as we have said, to know the nature of its object, that is, of the human body."³⁰ Who or what are these "others" that have a different mind to humans? Spinoza does not say, but since he states here that the object of the mind is its body, it is at least possible that non-human animals with bodies meet this standard.³¹ Admittedly, Spinoza even seems to imply that the difference between human and non-human minds is a difference of degree or proportion rather than a difference of nature or kind. For, he writes:

²⁹ "With Spinoza's theory of affect, we have a comprehensive redefinition of human agency. More than an affirmation of our corporeality, Spinoza's theory of affect gives rise to a notion of agency that is in no way exclusively human." Sharp, *Spinoza & the Politics of Renaturalization*, 25.

³⁰ EIIP13schol.

³¹ "For the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to [humans] than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate. For each thing there is necessarily an idea in God, of which God is the cause in the same way as he is of the human body. And so, whatever we have said of the idea of the human body must also be said of the idea of any thing." Ibid.

. . . in proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. And in proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, as other bodies concur with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly. And from these we can know the excellence of one mind over the others . . .³²

The letter of Spinoza's writing therefore seems to lend tacit support to Sharp's interpretation of non-human thinkers. Yet, although Spinoza consistently affirms that the body is the object of the mind, he also consistently argues that the human mind does not express any adequate ideas insofar as it attends only to the affections of the body.

. . . the mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of Nature, that is, so long as it is *determined externally*, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions.³³

I therefore interpret the relation between human and non-human agencies in Spinoza's ontology differently from Sharp. Although Spinoza seems to suggest that non-human animals may in some sense "think," I do not believe that he would consider the thoughts that they think to be adequate or "free." For this reason, I conceive a distinction between human and non-human agencies. If

³² Ibid.

³³ EIIP29schol. Emphasis Added.

Spinoza had conceived non-human animals to express the same kind of freedom that human beings do, then his affirmation of butchery and animal exploitation would be deeply hypocritical and, frankly, deplorable.³⁴ While I do not necessarily condone Spinoza's description of animal exploitation in this way, I do think that this demonstrates a fundamental difference of kind and not only of degree in Spinoza's idea of human and non-human agencies.

The difference of our interpretation notwithstanding, I find great value in Sharp's project of renaturalization. The idea of renaturalization is valuable because it seeks to inspire a reinterpretation of our all-too human ideas of *eco-nomy* (the rules of the home) and *eco-logy* (science of the home). For, a human being, just like any other singular thing, can exist only within a relatively delicate range of environmental conditions. Therefore, the preservation and perseverance of our being (as individuals and as a species) depends on a desire to understand, order, and connect the causes through which we not only subsist, but thrive. Thus, renaturalization aims to reconceptualize our relationship to nature without hierarchy, which is not only admirable, but profoundly necessary. Hence, I support Sharp's aim to erode those models of humanity "that animate hatred, albeit indirectly, by suggesting that we are, at one extreme, defective Gods or, at the other, corrupt animals who need to be restored to our natural condition."³⁵ Yet, even though there is great value in the political manifesto of renaturalization, I cannot use it to engage the paradox with which my study is concerned. That is, renaturalization

³⁴ "...it is clear that the law against killing animals is based more on empty superstition and unmanly compassion than sound reason. The rational principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us to establish a bond with [humans], but not with the lower of animals, or with things whose nature is different from human nature. We have the same right against them that they have against us...Not that I deny that the lower animals have sensation. But I do deny that we are therefore not permitted to consider our own advantage, use them at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us. For they do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects." EIVP37schol.

³⁵ Sharp, *Spinoza & the Politics of Renaturalization*, 4-5.

cannot, without undermining its own thesis, engage the paradox that it is because human beings know that they are part of nature that human beings are not subject to only extrinsic natural determinations. Thus, perhaps by design, renaturalization does not aim to interpret the significance of Spinoza's ontological argument for the necessary existence of God, which I argue is the basis of Spinoza's transindividualism.

I will now conclude my literature review with Etienne Balibar whose work in *Spinoza, the Transindividual* (2018),³⁶ and *Spinoza & Politics* (1998),³⁷ and other related articles, has been absolutely indispensable to my study. Balibar's work on Spinoza emphasizes the simultaneity in which human relations exist through the double expression of rational and imaginary "modes of communication" which institute and characterize the various expressions of political and religious life. Balibar uses the term transindividuality to describe the social construction of the "real" through the simultaneous coupling of rational and imaginary forces. This doubling corresponds to processes through which individuality is constituted and sustained. On the one hand, Balibar shows us through the encounter of Spinoza and Simondon, that there is "individuation" which describes the material processes through which singular things acquire a temporary but fleeting individuality through an increase or decrease in their power that, in contrast to their local environment, affords a kind of relative autonomy. However, because there is always a more powerful singular thing in nature, this kind of individuality is never durable since the autonomy that sustains it is relative to the contingencies of its place and time. On the other hand, there is what Balibar calls "individualization" which describes the socially conditioned processes of human subjectivity which is possible only within the dynamics of

³⁶ Balibar, *Spinoza, the Transindividual*.

³⁷ Balibar, *Spinoza & Politics*.

collective imaginations (languages, symbols, etc.). Balibar thus defines Spinoza's transindividuality as a combination of three key ideas:

In the first place, individuality is not only a central notion in Spinoza, but the very form of necessary – and consequently real – existence . . . The individual is obviously not a 'substance,' as in Aristotle, but conversely substance (or God, or Nature) does not 'precede' individual: it is nothing *other* than their multiplicity. It designates in the same way the infinite process of production of individuals and the infinity of causal connections existing between them. Secondly, an individual is a unity: any real individuality is composed of distinct parts. Above all, individuals are . . . the effects or moments of a process of individuation and, indissociably, individualisation . . . Hence, thirdly, the fact that the construction and activity of individuals originally [*sic*] involve a relationship to other individuals. No individual is in himself 'complete' or self-sufficient . . . In other words, the *processes* that make individuals relatively autonomous or separate are not themselves separate, but reciprocal or interdependent.³⁸

Balibar also offers a very brief review of authors who engage Spinoza on the issue of transindividualism. While considering Pierre-François Moreau's work in *Experience and Eternity in Spinoza* (1994),³⁹ Balibar suggests that the strength of Moreau's interpretation is to show that the practical utility of the passions is precisely what constitutes their effective reality:

This does not mean that the foundation or construction of the state is just a matter of a game of certain passions against others. It is, rather, a matter of finding in every man 'a

³⁸ Balibar, *Spinoza, the Transindividual*, 43–44.

³⁹ Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza: l'expérience et l'éternité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994).

passionate aspiration for the benefits of reason' which teaches the usefulness of social peace, and aspiration reinforced by experience and the sovereignty of which serves to inculcate obedience to institutions . . . But experience does not just have an auxiliary function: as the result of its duration, it also appears as constitutive of the historical individuality that makes people into *a* people.⁴⁰

Balibar's arguments for the transindividuality of the rational and the imaginary in processes of individuation and individualization offers enormous insight into Spinoza's analysis of the theological-political constitution of the ancient Israelite state and the idea accommodation. Balibar is in my view largely unrivaled in his ability to navigate Spinoza's challenging interweaving of metaphysical, ontological, and political ideas. However, there remain elements of transindividuality in Spinoza that Balibar has left unexplored and has even at times obscured. In my view, these vestigial and obscured elements center on what I call the ethics of interpretation. Despite all of Balibar's excellent attention to the profound interconnections between the modes of community and communication, he does not attend to the constitutive function of *interpretation* in these relations. Furthermore, Balibar emphasizes an opposition between the idea of "inter-subjectivity" and transindividuality that, on the surface, seems to lend criticism to the dialogical "betweenness" in which inter-pretation operates. Balibar argues that inter-subjectivity is opposed to transindividuality because the former privileges and retains the distinction between the "inner" and "outer" such that something could be *between* them. For Balibar, the notion of transindividuality is designed to rupture and expose such binary distinctions as inadequate and partial. "The concept of intersubjectivity implies that our

⁴⁰ Balibar, *Spinoza, the Transindividual*, 113.

relationship to a ‘common’ world in which we situate the reality of objects is mediated by an originary recognition of the *ego* and the *alter ego*.”⁴¹

Balibar’s critique is fundamentally aimed at the Husserlian or Leibnizian idea of a simple or irreducible atomism according to which notions of interiority and exteriority follow. However, while Balibar’s critique of this idea is well deserved in a Spinozistic framework, he makes the surprising mistake of using it to suggest that Spinoza’s understanding of the golden rule, as reflecting an inter-subjective ideal, expresses the cyclical structure of imaginary knowledge. For Balibar, if self-consciousness is constructed on merely representational or imaginary grounds then it is simply “a circular process of successive identifications in which I never cease to imagine the Other via my image, and to imagine myself via the Other.” While this description of imaginary consciousness is productive, he goes on to write:

One might be tempted to think that this way of conceiving the structure of the imagination represents a secularisation and a generalisation of the biblical maxim (which we know Spinoza considered the core of the ‘true religion’ of which the *Theological Political Treatise* speaks): ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,’ except that Spinoza also introduces in this transposition the idea of the inherently *ambivalent* character of passions and processes of identification, which involve not only love but also hatred.⁴²

It is hard to know what to make of this passage from the second chapter of *Spinoza, the Transindividual*. On the one hand, I completely agree with everything Balibar writes in it. The form of consciousness that Spinoza calls imagination does indeed proceed through cyclical

⁴¹ Ibid., 91, n68.

⁴² Ibid., 61–2.

processes of identifications in which the image of the self and the image of the other are indistinguishable. This can be seen in the TPT when Spinoza describes superstition as an indistinguishable vacillation between hope and fear, and also in the *Ethics* where imaginary consciousness is shown to confuse itself with its images and affections.⁴³ I agree with Balibar that this self-effacing process cannot be considered a secularization of the divine law of Scripture that Spinoza makes central to all *vera religio*. Yet Balibar never returns to what he might otherwise see as an adequately transindividual understanding of the golden rule given its fundamental role in Spinoza's concept of religion and morality. Consequently, Balibar gives the impression that he does not think the golden rule constitutes a transindividual knowledge of God. I intend to demonstrate otherwise.

b. How to Read Spinoza

Before I outline the chapter breakdown of this study, I should address two questions of interpretation that my review of the relevant scholarship above does not directly engage. How should we interpret and ultimately understand Spinoza's philosophical project; and how do I justify the particular interpretive method that I adopt in this study? Modern readers of Spinoza who are familiar with the theological, philosophical, and political concerns of the mid-seventeenth century Europe are likely to recognize the controversy of his arguments. Whether we think of the trial of Galileo in 1633 or of revered medieval thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, the conventional relation between theology and philosophy was (and in many ways remains today) characterized by opposition and censorship. Readers additionally familiar with Spinoza's

⁴³ See TPT preface, and EIIP16–17.

excommunication from the Jewish community of Amsterdam and the Remonstrant controversies of the Dutch United Provinces will know that Spinoza's arguments had personal stakes. It is not surprising then that the circumstances and contents of Spinoza's writing have led many commentators to opposed interpretations of his most fundamental ideas.

Some critics object that Spinoza's arguments are either contradictory despite his efforts and so are unsatisfactory if taken without addition, while others claim that in fact his aims were contrary to his declared intentions. Again, this is hardly surprising since Spinoza, who died relatively young and produced relatively few "completed" works, does not seem to fully draw out all the implications of his thinking in ways that are obvious or easy to grasp. For example, Spinoza is easily misunderstood when readers do not closely follow how early claims and ideas in his texts are modified by later dialectical developments. What is clear, however, is that the central terms of Spinoza's thinking challenge readers of all sorts to decide whether his problematics constitute fundamental and irremediable contradictions or paradoxical and dialectical insights that form a unity of opposites. Readers must choose between the earlier and later perspectives of Spinoza's philosophy in order to construct coherent interpretations of his texts. Those who take the former perspective, however, must adopt one of two contrary approaches: either Spinoza contradicts and so deceives *himself*, or Spinoza deceives and so contradicts *others*. The first does not warrant a rigorous analysis because it accuses Spinoza of ignorance regarding the most fundamental aspects of his thinking and writing. This is not a fruitful approach since it considers the value of Spinoza's ideas to be beneath the value of their criticism. Roger Scruton writes, for example, in the final chapter of *Spinoza: A Very Short Introduction* (2002) that "Spinoza's metaphysics contains [*sic*] a fatal flaw"⁴⁴ that undermines

⁴⁴ Roger Scruton, *Spinoza: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 111.

the contributions of his thinking. The purported flaw that Scruton is referring to is Spinoza's conviction that reality must correspond to our capacity for forming adequate and true ideas. However, it is worth asking Scruton in what sense this presupposition can be considered a "flaw" rather than the necessary starting point of an epistemic effort. If the necessary elements of human thought did not involve a necessary correspondence to an absolute reality, then how would we ever know it without simply reducing that knowledge to illusion? Either reality would be false and our cognition would be true, or reality would be true and our cognition would be false. Either way, the real would never be thought and thought would never be real. Thus, even if Scruton's criticism were in some sense correct, we could have absolutely no certainty in its conclusion one way or another because the very idea of certainty presupposes the necessity of this correspondence. Yet, Scruton concludes that "whatever the weaknesses of Spinoza's system, one is tempted to think that a philosopher cannot be wholly wrong who calls forth such a quantity of spite in someone who would have agreed, had he understood his argument, with so much of what he said."⁴⁵ Scruton's analysis of Spinoza's philosophy ultimately thus begs the question that any diligent reader must ask – why should we study fatally flawed ideas if the most generous thing that can be said about them is that perhaps they are not entirely misguided?

What then of the second interpretive strategy that considers Spinoza to have written in such a way that condescends to his readers so to conceal his true meaning? This is the method popularized by Leo Strauss in "How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise,"⁴⁶ and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁴⁶ Leo Strauss, "How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 17 (1947): 69-131.

"... it was possible to assert that in the Bible, a superior mind or superior minds condescend to speak in the language of ordinary people, and that there occur in the Bible a number of statements which contradict those Biblical statements that are adapted to vulgar prejudices. Spinoza was thus led to assert that at least some of the Biblical

those who follow it like André Tsel. The principal idea of their strategy is that Spinoza, to avoid detection and censorship, must have communicated his ideas through the obscurity of an encrypted pentimento that can be penetrated only by the most astute of the intellectual elite, not unlike Plato's philosopher kings. For authors like Strauss and Tsel, learning how to study Spinoza is thus like taking a master class in "Machiavellian" deception.⁴⁷

Central to Strauss's method is the idea that philosophical analysis of religious belief fails because philosophy, as an expression of the finitude of human knowledge, cannot legitimately claim to make itself commensurate with the knowledge of a whole (God). His point, ultimately, is that, on the one hand, philosophy cannot legitimately employ the resources of instrumental reason to either affirm or deny the existence of God or the truth of religious revelation because it is always operating with a knowledge of what is partial, finite, and incomplete. For Strauss, this includes empirical notions of materialist science and history because the perspectival lenses on which their subjects depend can only exhibit small fractions of an infinite whole at a time. On the other hand, theology is powerless to evaluate the truths of philosophy because, as Strauss conceives faith, it is prior to and unrelated to rational judgment. According to Strauss, one either blindly believes or one does not, but in either case the affirmation or negation is made without sufficient reason. Since philosophy cannot attain knowledge of a whole, for Strauss it necessarily presupposes an arbitrary system of valuation, and this is precisely the epistemological function of

contradictions are conscious or deliberate, and therewith to suggest that there is an esoteric teaching of the Bible, or that the literal meaning of the Bible hides a deeper, mysterious meaning. By contradicting this ultimate consequence, he leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to the ironical or exoteric character of his assertion that the statements of the Bible are consciously adapted by its authors to the capacity of the vulgar... We may say that Spinoza uses the sketch of his exoteric interpretation of the Bible for indicating the character of his own exoteric procedure. "Strauss, "How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise," 107-108.

⁴⁷ Although I use the term "Machiavellian" here to imply its colloquial meaning of covert manipulation and deception, I recognize that this popular understanding does not actually reflect a strong reading of Machiavelli's political works. However, since Machiavelli is not the object of this study, I shall pass over this in relative silence.

faith. Thus, “the serious argument in favor of revelation,” for Strauss, is not one based on a universally shared understanding, it is one based only on the subjective and inner testimony of the believer. This is what Strauss calls “the experience, the personal experience, of man’s encounter with God.”⁴⁸ That is, since faith is constituted without a necessary relation to reason, for Strauss, the convincing elements of a faith are determined entirely at the level of subjective feeling and inner experience. However, the subjective argument in favor of belief raises the problem of how we understand the relationship between God – the whole – and humanity – apparently a mere part of a whole. According to Strauss’ argument for the testimony of subjective feeling, for example, does the religious affirmation of a faith then vanish when the ephemeral feelings of sublimity and inspiration dissipate? Furthermore, if the contents of a faith are determined by the inner recesses of private feeling alone, then in what sense can faith be expressed or externalized in communication and community with others?

If we base the standard of religion solely on the subjectivity of experience, then we will inevitably confront the insurmountable problem of distinguishing between the subjective, and therefore relative, aspects of a faith and its absolute, and therefore universal, content and dictates. In other words, we will be unable to distinguish by mere subjective and relative authority what is a revealed truth of God and what is merely “a ‘human interpretation’ of God’s action,” in which case it “is no longer God’s action itself.”⁴⁹ Strauss thus seems to be aware of the problem but unable to overcome it. For, he notes that the diversity of religious faith is often expressed and interpreted “in radically different manners . . . Yet only one interpretation can be the true one.

⁴⁸ Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY, 1997), 123–24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

There is, therefore, a need for argument between the various believers in revelation, an argument which cannot help but allude *somehow* to objectivity.⁵⁰ Strauss is aware that some sort of standard is necessary to qualify the contents of a faith but cannot distinguish this “objectivity” from the relative subjectivity in which it is situated. This is because he does not have a concept with which to distinguish what is absolute from what is objective but only in a relative sense. Ultimately, Strauss is forced to appeal to a finite and relative notion of objectivity because he cannot conceive of an absolute and universal idea that serves as its own standard. Strauss’s method does not account for the fundamental challenge of religious interpretation: the subject of faith (the faithful believer) must be as absolute or sovereign as the object of faith (God) in order to be able to confirm the religious content of that faith in the first place.

Strauss’ method obscures the notion that since faith always involves individual interpretation, and that interpretations always involve and express human reason and judgement, there is a necessary, reciprocal, and indissociable relationship between an individual’s interpretive reason and their faith. His method cannot explain this mutual reciprocity because it divorces the cognitive functions of reason and faith such that they are completely unrelatable due to the differences that seem to set them irrevocably apart. Strauss does not grasp the paradox of singularity as it applies to the relation between religious faith and philosophical reason. As I shall argue and elaborate throughout this study, the paradox is that a knowledge of and faith in God is inconceivable outside a knowledge of self and faith in others, and vice versa. In other words, the paradox is that despite their differences, faith and reason do not constitute two opposed expressions of human nature but are instead “transindividual” expressions of that nature. Hence, as we shall see, neither a knowledge of nor a faith in God, as the absolutely singular and infinite

⁵⁰ Ibid. Emphasis added.

whole of existence, is possible without a knowledge of and faith in the absolute singularity of the infinitely many peoples whose faithful practices constitute and usher in the kingdom of God. Therefore, given the irreducible singularity of each and every individual faith, one interpretation of God's divine nature is true only if all faithful interpretations are true. The kingdom of God for which Spinoza strives thus does not refer exclusively to the inheritors of Abrahamic traditions and ceremonies, but to any expression of faith predicated on the universal compatibility of its doctrine. In other words, no religious interpretation can be truly faithful unless it can recognize itself in the different yet equally true faith of others in relation to whom one's own faith is practiced and perfected. Strauss' method of interpretation fails to meet this standard because it cannot bring together the unity of faith and reason in a way that shows that they both necessarily and equally follow from that which must be conceived as its own standard – the absolute sovereignty (singularity) of the individual. On the contrary, Strauss consistently exports the standards of reason and faith to something or someone external to the individual mind who conceives and practices the ideals of reason and faith in their daily lives. Thus, I disagree with Strauss' method of interpretation because it cannot provide an absolute standard with which to interpret and evaluate the truth of either philosophical or religious doctrines.

We can thus see why for Strauss and for his supporters like Tosel, if faith must *somehow* allude to objectivity, then it is the intellectual elite who have the scrutinizing powers capable of approximating that objectivity and so can be better trusted with interpretive responsibility. Tosel, acknowledging this, writes: "The Platonic philosophy of the 'Republic' and the 'Laws' permits this problem to be resolved: the Philosopher-Legislator is identified with the Philosopher-

King.”⁵¹ Tsel is even aware that “this is a ‘philosophical’ tendency illustrated by Maimonides” yet he does not acknowledge that Spinoza’s critique of Maimonides disqualifies this as a viable interpretive method for Spinoza.⁵² The heterodoxy of philosophical interpretation is far from a practice in democracy, according to Tsel, since the philosophical interpreter opposes two antagonizing forces that threaten the pursuit of objectivity – the fickle multitude and the dogmatic theologians. According to Tsel, philosophers must conceal their true ideas and obscure them by wrapping them in the status-quo so to thwart the censorship of authorities. “The philosopher is then condemned to live according to two regimes, to speak two languages.”⁵³ Ultimately, according to Strauss and Tsel, philosophers can only entrust their ideas to other like-minded philosophers. Consequentially, the rich encounters with difference that facilitate and propel the act of interpretation is reduced from dialogue to monologue, from colloquium to lecture. Philosophers who dare to interpret the content of religions must apparently pander to their would-be dissenters while using this pandering rhetoric “to make it speak [their] own heretical views.”⁵⁴ Hence, for Tsel, “the philosopher works out a political compromise by accepting the mode of life of the theological-political community to which he belongs and by forming a ‘party’ of disciples, which constitutes the kernel of a new community in the midst of the superstitious city.”⁵⁵ Spinoza’s philosophical agenda, according to Tsel, does not seek to enlighten the dark corners of the world it already happens to inhabit, or teach others how to pass

⁵¹ André Tsel, “Superstition and Reading,” in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (1984; reis., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 152.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

this torch, so to speak, but rather seeks to add its light to what has already been illuminated. I cannot accept these views for at least two reasons. Firstly, Strauss and Tsel essentially reduce the democracy of interpretation, that is, the universal compatibility of reason and faith, to an aristocracy of philosophical priests. As a result, Strauss and Tsel therefore reduce the universal love of all to the relative love of some. This method of interpretation re-enacts the ideals of Maimonides (and Plato) that Spinoza explicitly rejects in throughout the TPT. Thus, Strauss and those who follow him cannot offer a fruitful approach to studying Spinoza because they install a separation and hierarchy in the inherently democratic act of interpretation.

What then is the advantage of my proposed strategy to interpret Spinoza's thinking as a paradoxical or dialectical unity of opposites? It is that this method allows both reader and text to account for, thereby becoming responsible for, their own respective errors and imperfections.⁵⁶ As we shall see, by interpreting the differences inherent to Spinoza's thinking as paradoxical unities we apply Spinoza's own hermeneutical and epistemological principles to the interpretation of his own works. The upshot, therefore, of this method is that it simultaneously demystifies our understanding of Spinoza, the Bible, and ultimately the relation between God, faith, and reason.

⁵⁶ The mutual accountability of error that my method affords means that it is not only readers who come to identify and strive to perfect their own inevitable errors in interpreting the text, it also allows the text to account for and become responsible for its own inevitable errors without thereby being reducing the text to error itself. For example, Spinoza's writing sometimes exhibits a sexism and racism that reflects pervasive attitudes and biases of his time. However, given my method of interpretation, readers can overcome this sexism and racism on the basis of Spinoza's own principles without thereby excusing and justifying them as anything other than errors of judgement that Spinoza had not managed to liberate himself from during his lifetime. On the basis of a dialectical method of interpretation, however, readers are not fated to the same errors committed by an author. And this is precisely why (where possible) I opt to paraphrase Spinoza's sexist language in my citations. Thus, my aim in doing so is not to censure Spinoza's errors as if to shelter him in a *sanctuary ignorance*, rather my aim is to convey that the value of Spinoza's philosophy is irreducible to the errors that, like any human expression, it inevitably involves.

When we treat God as a “sanctuary for ignorance” regarding the most basic aspects of our nature,⁵⁷ like our power to think and move, we risk forfeiting the standards by which we distinguish the true from the false, and therefore religion from superstition. When we treat God as the principal cause of mystery, we risk mystifying the two most essential elements of both religion and philosophy – namely, the knowledge of the whole (substance) and the knowledge of the part (modes). What is so essential about these two foundational elements of human thought and existence is that if we had no knowledge of the one, we could have no knowledge of the other. That is, we would be unable to tell either when we had reduced the infinite nature of God to the finitude of human experience, or when we had confused the relative weaknesses of human nature with the absolute power of God. This is why Spinoza is convinced that every human being, whether they recognize it or not, has an adequate and true idea of God for the very reason that every human being has the power to distinguish the true from the false. Since we cannot identify what is false via what is false, and we cannot derive what is true from what is false, we must acknowledge that just as “the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false.”⁵⁸ Therefore, we shall see that Spinoza’s “proof” for the necessary existence of God is not to be found in a priori definitions or a posteriori demonstrations, but in the absolute and practical knowledge of what is necessarily its own standard, its own principle cause of existing, knowing, and acting.

c. Chapter Breakdown

Since the paradox of Spinoza’s ontological argument prohibits thinking of one part without the others, each chapter of my study will unfold one aspect of the paradox but within

⁵⁷ EI appendix.

⁵⁸ EIIP43schol.

interdisciplinary contexts. Overall, I will show that: 1) an adequate idea of God is unknowable outside the immanent nature of the human mind which, in knowing both God (whole) and itself (part), strives to transition to an ever-greater perfection of its nature through its practical relations to others; and 2) that personal and collective forms of individuality are constituted by the modes of communication or interpretation through which human beings conceive the idea of the whole (God).

Chapter two of this study is titled “Contradiction and Paradox” because in it I aim to distinguish the contradictory logic of teleology from Spinoza’s paradoxical logic of immanence. The focus of the first section, “Teleology: The Logic of Superstition,” is to show how and why Spinoza considers teleological ideals to constitute the essential logic of superstition from which his ideas of religion must be absolutely distinguished. The second section, “Darker than Light but Lighter than Dark: The Contradiction on Platonic Teleology,” further situates Spinoza’s critique of teleology in the philosophical ideals of Plato. In the third section I show that Spinoza, who follows Descartes’s lead but diverges in important ways, argues that since truth is its own standard clear and distinct or adequate ideas must involve a necessary and intuited idea of God.

Chapter three is titled “The Pluralism of Religious Monism.” In it I show that Spinoza’s critique of superstition is surprisingly but fundamentally situated in an affirmation of biblical faith. That is, if the false is only known in light of the true then Spinoza’s critique of superstition must be understood to presuppose a notion of true religion (*vera religio*). My aim in the first section, “Superstition and the Immanence of Revelation,” is to demonstrate that the prophetic knowledge of God that Spinoza proposes in the TPT is entirely consistent with the paradox of immanence as it occurs in the *Ethics*. The second section, “Spinoza’s Interpretive Method,” argues that the method of biblical interpretation that Spinoza offers in chapter seven of the TPT

is transindividual or paradoxically singular. This is because it is at once *universal*, since it depends on absolutely common properties of the human mind, and *particular*, since it encourages the accommodation of religious doctrine to the images and affections that are compatible with individual piety. The third section, “Monism=Pluralism,” argues that therefore there are as many true expressions of Abrahamic monism as there are different interpreters to realize its contents. In other words, the truth of religious monism, the religious idea that there is one thing that cannot be thought without necessarily existing (God), does not exist outside of the pluralistic interpretations constitutive of the human community.

Chapter four is titled “The Monolith and the Manifold” and in it I aim to demonstrate how Spinoza’s idea of the infinite multiplicity of individual things relates to and follows from the absolute singularity of God. Spinoza’s concept of essential singularity shows that the idea of “individuality,” human or otherwise, is a unique capacity for action that can only be realized within a collective context. In section one, “~~One~~ Substance with an Infinity of Attributes,” I consider what constitutes the unity of Spinoza’s metaphysical concept of an absolute substance with the infinite multiplicity of its attributes. In the second section, “Weak or Paradoxical Individuals?,” I ask what for Spinoza constitutes “individuals” (*individua*) and singular things (*res singulares*) given the vast interconnectedness and interdependence in which “modes” relate. I ask – if, as Spinoza consistently argues, an individual cannot subsist outside of the relations in which it is determined, then how can Spinoza maintain a strong theory of individuality without reducing individuals to the relations of which they are a part? The third section, “Striving for Freedom: Conatus as the Identity of Intellect and Will,” argues that Spinoza’s critique of freewill is fundamentally rooted in the affirmation of human freedom in the transition to an ever-greater (or lesser) perfection. My aim therefore is to demonstrate that the impossibility of a free will

does not preclude the necessity freedom itself. On the contrary, it is precisely the freedom expressed by the transition between greater or lesser perfection that constitutes individuality as such.

The concluding chapter of my dissertation is titled “Communication as an Ethics of Interpretation.” It aims to bring together the insights from the previous chapters in light of Etienne Balibar’s transindividual theory of communication. My aim in this last chapter is not to recapitulate Balibar’s reading but to show that a theory of communication requires a complimentary theory of interpretation. In conclusion, I posit the ontological navigation of paradoxical singularity through an ethics of interpretation.

Chapter Two

Contradiction and Paradox

In this chapter I argue for a fundamental incompatibility between the ideals of “classical” philosophers like Plato with those of Spinoza. The nature of this incompatibility concerns the power of the human mind to conceive an absolute standard of true ideas. For ancients like Plato, the standard according to which true ideas are known to relate to an existing reality is predicated on a logic of teleological relations between existing things and their ideas. Accordingly, the end, purpose, or essence of existing things is alienated from the merely partial idea of those things that human beings are capable of thinking. Despite clear idiosyncrasies that distinguish ancient or “classical” thinkers, the subordination of human finitude to final-causes of which we are fundamentally ignorant is a common feature of classical philosophies. Alternatively, distinctly modern philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza break with ancient traditions of thought by conceiving a standard of truth – namely, the idea of God – that is immanent to the human mind in such a way that the idea of the whole (God) is necessarily connected to and unified with its parts. By contrasting Spinoza’s idea of God with the philosophical ideals of classical teleology we will be in a better position to understand Spinoza’s paradoxical ontology.

Despite the incompatibility between Spinoza’s philosophy and ancients like Plato and Aristotle, some scholars still seek to establish relations of inheritance between them. Although some readers might think that Spinoza’s relentless critique of superstition invites a comparison with prebiblical philosophers, this tends to obfuscate the relation between God and the human being on which Spinoza’s idea of freedom depends. I argue, therefore, that Spinoza cannot be understood on the basis of analogy with “classical” or pre-biblical philosophy because his ideas occupy an irreducible position at the intersection between the religious and the philosophical. For

this reason, my first aim in this chapter is to identify teleology as the foundational logic of superstition from which Spinoza's ideas on religion must be categorically distinguished. Spinoza's critique of teleology, however, does not associate its idea with any one philosopher but instead treats it as symptomatic of a general way of thinking to which humans being are tragically susceptible. In the second section of this chapter, I situate this Spinoza's critique of teleology in "classical" philosophy in general but with a focus on Plato in particular. Although there exist many differences and disagreements between ancient philosophers who certainly, therefore, cannot all be described homogenously as "Platonistic," I argue nonetheless that a reliance on teleological ideals is common to its various schools of thought.⁵⁹ It is thus not Platonism itself from which I categorically distinguish Spinoza's philosophy but rather the comparison to any teleological mode of thought, whatever school or name it is attributed to. Hence, I focus this critique on Plato not because Plato is broadly representative of "classical" philosophy but because Plato offers the simplest and most concise teleological arguments that otherwise permeate the literature.

The first section of this chapter introduces Spinoza's critique of teleology insofar as it constitutes the quintessential logic of superstition. The second section of this chapter situates this critique in the works of Plato but also demonstrates that its application extends not only to Plato but well beyond to any philosophy that predicates its principles on teleological rule of non-contradiction. The final section of this chapter introduces Spinoza's paradox of singularity as it follows from his use of the ontological argument for the necessary existence of God.

⁵⁹ In the conclusion of the section of this chapter, I cite arguments from Brayton Polka's two volume study *Between Philosophy and Religion* in support of this reading.

a. Teleology: The Logic of Superstition

I argue in this section that Spinoza's critique of teleology in the *Ethics* implies that teleology is the philosophical equivalent of the theological-political notion of superstition critiqued in the TPT. Spinoza, however, does not use the term *teleology* but refers to it in his critique of "final-causes" in the appendix to part one and the false notions of perfection that they imply in the preface to part four. Teleology is a pseudo-philosophical mode of thinking based on the notion that things are what they are due to some ultimate *intention, purpose, or will*. Teleological ways of thinking account for *what* and *why* a thing is the way it is by conflating its nature with our relatively limited experience of it. Although he does not make the connection explicit, Spinoza's theory of superstition in the TPT can be understood as a religious or theological expression of teleology. All of Spinoza's greatest works express a fundamental concern with the dangerous implications and consequences of teleological thought. To understand Spinoza's ambitions we must understand the object of his critique. Hence, it is pertinent that we understand the philosophical, religious, and political expressions of teleology and how they relate in Spinoza's project.

I argue that Spinoza's primary philosophical aim was to liberate our ideas of religion, philosophy, and politics from the teleological "delusions of the Greeks."⁶⁰ That is, to free us from "the traces of our ancient bondage" since there are many "who are still at the mercy of pagan superstition" and are eager to present slavery as freedom under the pretext of religion.⁶¹ The TPT explicitly states that the Bible cannot be interpreted on the basis of either Platonic or

⁶⁰ TPT preface.18.

⁶¹ TPT preface.13.

Aristotelian principles, and that its content is thoroughly corrupted by the attempt.⁶² Moreover, by explicitly removing all traces of final-causes/ends from his metaphysics in the *Ethics*, Spinoza challenges the fundamentally unethical nature of Aristotle's work by the same name. The *Political Treatise*, had it been completed, would have likewise shown that democracy, as the most absolute form of sovereignty, bears no relation to its apparent Athenian roots but is instead, as suggested by the many political allegories in which Spinoza references the story of Adam, biblical in nature. So, although Spinoza never explicitly elaborated this distinction, the differences between teleological and biblical thought is fundamental to Spinoza's concerns. Spinoza's arguments consistently demonstrate that when these two irreconcilable modes of thought are confused or conflated, superstition, ignorance, and tyranny inevitably follow. It is therefore worth exploring the terms of this incompatibility, and why the very contents of religion, philosophy, and politics are at stake in it.

Spinoza's most explicit definition of superstition occurs in the preface of the TPT. Although he primarily describes superstition here as an inadequate kind of religious thought, he shows that its effects and conditions extend well beyond the domains of religion and into those of philosophy and politics. Superstition and teleology do not simply involve "false" ideas about God or whatever else. They are produced through fundamentally inadequate ways of thinking that involve the subordination of our intrinsic powers of action to external things. In other words, teleology and superstition involve the alienation of our power to think for ourselves to external causes that precede us as individuals and to which individuals are subordinated. While this resignation and subordination may appear irrational from a certain perspective, if we are to

⁶² Spinoza exemplifies this corruption in chapter seven of the TPT through the opposition between Maimonides and Alfakhar, who respectively adopt Aristotelian and Platonic principles in their interpretation of Scripture. Spinoza's critique of Maimonides and Alfakhar is dealt with in chapter three of this study.

understand its causes and conditions then we must ascribe it a kind of rationality however corrupted and confused that rational may be. Spinoza explains that individuals superstitiously export their freedoms to external things simply because of the perception of a greater fortune and security that can be gained through that initial resignation. Superstition, therefore, is caused by the rational desire for self-preservation but it is expressed in an irrational way because it removes the self as the agent of the perseverance.

If [people] could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if fortune were always favorable to them, no one would be in the grip of superstition. But they are often in such a tight spot that they cannot decide on any plan. Then they usually vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear, desiring immoderately the uncertain goods of fortune, and ready to believe anything whatever. While the mind is in doubt, it's easily driven this way or that – and all the more easily when, shaken by hope and fear, it comes to a standstill. At other times, it's over-confident, boastful and presumptuous.⁶³

Superstition is thus the resignation of human agency to chance fortune and divinized fates. But belief in such divinations and the gambles of fate are not simply things to which the stupid, gullible, or heterodox are susceptible to. They are passions to which human nature is itself prone to suffer.

Some say that superstition arises from the fact that all mortals have a certain confused idea of divinity. My account of the cause of superstition clearly entails, first, that all men by nature are subject to superstition; second, that like all mockeries of the mind and impulses of frenzy, it is necessarily very fluctuating and inconstant; and finally, that it is

⁶³ TPT preface.1.

protected only by hope, hate, anger, and deception, because it arises, not from reason, but only from the most powerful affects.⁶⁴

Of course, Spinoza is aware that there is nothing very novel in this theory of superstition since most people are quite aware of the superstitions of others. What most people may not, however, be quite aware of are the superstitions under which they themselves labor, which idols they themselves consciously or unconsciously worship.

Everyone, I think, knows this, though most people, I believe, do not know themselves. For no one who has lived among men has failed to see that when they are prospering, even if they are quite inexperienced, they are generally so full of their own wisdom that they think themselves wronged if anyone wants to give them advice – whereas in adversity they don't know where to turn, and beg advice from everyone.⁶⁵

In this way, the superstition is not limited only to religious contexts but includes any situation in which we are faced with our own relative impotence and from which we then crave a master who might reward our deference. “The reason, then, why superstition arises, lasts, and increases, is fear.”⁶⁶ Even when the superstitious are not themselves afraid of a present threat or the absence of a reward, fear is still the primary contagion by way of which superstition spreads to others since if others can be made to fear the same thing, then they can be brought under the same master.

⁶⁴ TPT preface.7.

⁶⁵ TPT preface.2.

⁶⁶ TPT preface.5.

Spinoza's preferred examples for the religious, philosophical, and political expressions of superstition tend to be those of ancient Greek origin. Although some commentators, like Edwin Curley,⁶⁷ believe that this is primarily a rhetorical strategy used by Spinoza to garner sympathetic readings from his Christian contemporaries, I believe there is a deeper reason why Spinoza takes this focus. Spinoza indicates that his intention is to free us from "the traces of our ancient bondage."⁶⁸ Hence, his aim is not to reduce the origin of modern religion to ancient Greek superstition, but to thoroughly separate the two after centuries of confusion so that adequate expressions of religion can flourish without superstitious or teleological models.

To illustrate the connection between religious and political superstition, Spinoza asks us to consider the conquests of Alexander as an example.

Alexander, who began to use seers from genuine superstition only when he first learned to fear fortune at the Susidan Gates. But after he defeated Darius, he stopped consulting soothsayers and seers until an unfavorable turn of events once again terrified him.

Because the Bactrians had defected, the Scythians were threatening battle, and he himself was rendered inactive by a wound.⁶⁹

It was Alexander's inactivity due to bad fortune and a wound that caused him to alienate his power of action to the Gods. Yet, in times of victory Alexander famously proclaimed himself to be a God. The veil of superstition thus functions as both a kind of insurance that relieves individuals from responsibility for their failures but also as a kind of propaganda used to subject

⁶⁷ "Spinoza begins with examples of pagan superstition, whose irrationality his Christian contemporaries would readily concede. But soon he slides into a critique of his own time. 'The multitude are still at the mercy of pagan superstition.' (Preface, 13)" Edwin Curley, "Editorial Preface," in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. II*, 45.

⁶⁸ TPT preface.13.

⁶⁹ TPT preface.5.

others to the whims of an individual's passions, thereby relaying inactivity to others. Spinoza thinks that the example of Alexander, and other ancient Greek and Roman practices like augury,⁷⁰ are good illustrations of superstition because they emphasize the connection between fear, mystery, and political instability.

We could give a great many examples like this which would show most clearly that [people] are tormented by superstition only so long as they are afraid; that all the things they have ever worshipped in illusory religion have been nothing but apparitions, the delusions of a sad and fearful mind; and finally, that it is when states have been in the greatest difficulties, that seers have had the greatest control over ordinary people, and been most dangerous to their Kings.⁷¹

If Alexander is an example of theological-political superstition, then what or who constitutes an example of philosophical superstition for Spinoza? For this we should look to Spinoza's philosophical magnum opus – *the Ethics*. Yet, in doing so we immediately confront a strangely obscure question. To whom are Spinoza's criticisms directed at in the *Ethics*? I have already suggested that Spinoza's targets are the various proponents of ancient Greek philosophy and those who claim to interpret religion through the ideals of Plato and Aristotle. But the *Ethics* does not once refer to Plato or Aristotle by name, and nearly all opponents whose objections Spinoza anticipates go unnamed.⁷² So what reasons are there to think that the target of Spinoza's

⁷⁰ “Indeed, they believe God rejects the wise, and writes his decrees, not in the mind, but in the entrails of animals; they think fools, madmen and birds predict his decrees by divine inspiration and prompting. That's how crazy fear makes [people].” TPT preface.4.

⁷¹ TPT preface.6.

⁷² The only exception to this is Descartes who is mentioned by name in the preface to EV. Although the context is critical, Spinoza clearly conveys general respect and admiration in stark contrast to the unnamed opponents of other sections.

criticisms are the proponents of ancient Greek philosophy? The foremost reason is that the TPT makes this explicit:

Furthermore, if they [i.e. religious authorities who confuse religion with superstition] did indeed possess some divine light, this would surely be manifested in their teaching. I grant that they have expressed boundless wonder at Scripture's profound mysteries, yet I do not see that they have taught anything more than the speculations of Aristotelians or Platonists, and have made Scripture conform to these. It was not enough for them to share in the delusions of the Greeks: they have sought to represent the prophets as sharing in these same delusions . . . For if you enquire as to the nature of the mysteries which they see lurking in Scripture, you will certainly find nothing but the notions of an Aristotle or a Plato or the like, which often seem to suggest the fantasies of any uneducated person rather than the findings of an accomplished biblical scholar.⁷³

Spinoza very explicitly directs his criticisms at those who confuse Greek and biblical principles in the TPT, but he does not elaborate on this incompatibility. Although the *Ethics* adds content to this incompatibility, it does so only at the level of implication. It is not, however, an obscure implication since at least two of the major ideas that Spinoza critiques and distinguishes from his

⁷³ TPT preface.18.

own in the *Ethics* are the commonly recognized ideals of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy: the doctrine of final-causes/ends,⁷⁴ and the mystical refuge of (Socratic) ignorance.⁷⁵

Spinoza's critique of teleology is concentrated in the appendix to EI and prepares readers for the critique of false universal notions that teleological ideals involve in the preface to EIV. I will explain the nature of this connection since, as we will see, the problem and its solution depend on the logic from which the ideas of "perfections" or "wholes" are conceived. The question is, from what premise can a finite, limited, and imperfect thing like a human being possibly conceive an idea of an infinite, unlimited, and perfect whole? But before we can answer this, we should address a major prejudice that Spinoza anticipates would prevent his readers from understanding him. Therefore, before we encounter the paradox of singularity, it is worth clearing the way of prejudices that would obscure it.

The philosophical prejudice that Spinoza wants to dispel is what I have been calling "teleology."⁷⁶ Spinoza describes teleology as the idea "that [humans] commonly suppose that all natural things act, as [humans] do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for

⁷⁴ "For if God acts for the sake of an end, he necessarily wants something which he lacks. And though the theologians and metaphysicians distinguish between an end of need and an end of assimilation, they nevertheless confess that God did all things for his own sake, not for the sake of the things to be created. For before creation they can assign nothing except God for whose sake God would act. And so they are necessarily compelled to confess that God lacked those things for the sake of which he willed to prepare means, and that he desired them." EI appendix.

⁷⁵ "Nor ought we here to pass over the fact that the followers of this doctrine, who have wanted to show off their cleverness in assigning the ends of things, have introduced – to prove this doctrine of theirs – a new way of arguing: by reducing things, not to the impossible, but to ignorance . . . And so they will not stop asking for the causes of causes until you take refuge in the will of God, that is, the sanctuary of ignorance." Ibid.

⁷⁶ Aristotle famously proposes four distinct kinds of causes in his *Physics*. The "telos" is the fourth kind of cause and refers to the final-end or resting place in which a thing comes into its essential nature. Hence, the telos is "that for the sake of which a thing is done, e.g. health is the cause of walking about. ('Why is he walking about?' we say. 'To be healthy,' and, having said that, we think we have assigned the cause)." Aristotle, "Physics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (1941; reis. New York: Random House, Modern Library Editions, 2001), II.3, 194b, 241.

[humans], and [humans] that [they] might worship God.”⁷⁷ But what causes this seemingly ubiquitous prejudice? Why are human beings so susceptible to think that everything, even God, acts and exists on account of an end or a purpose outside itself? We must know the causes and conditions of teleological thinking because from it other “prejudices have arisen concerning *good* and *evil*, *merit* and *sin*, *praise* and *blame*, *order* and *confusion*, *beauty* and *ugliness*, and other things of this kind.”⁷⁸

To critique a teleological notion of universality Spinoza must do so from a non-teleological position that does not depend on an external standard. But since Spinoza does not posit his theory of mind until the second part of the *Ethics*,⁷⁹ which then leads to his positive notions of universality, he offers here only a negative standard of universality which he assumes will be agreeable enough to begin the investigation into our susceptibility to final-ends. “It will be sufficient here if I take as a foundation what everyone must acknowledge: that all [humans] are born ignorant of the causes of things, and that they all want to seek their own advantage, and are conscious of this appetite.”⁸⁰ Two important consequences follow from this fundamental and non-teleological assumption. Firstly, humans think themselves “free” in a teleological sense because they are conscious of their actions and appetites but are not conscious

⁷⁷ EI appendix.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ “Second Part of the Ethics: Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind: *I pass now to explaining those things which must necessarily follow from the essence of God, or the infinite and eternal being – not, indeed, all of them, for we have demonstrated that infinitely many things must follow from it in infinitely many modes, but only those that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness.*” EII.

⁸⁰ EI appendix.

of “the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing.”⁸¹ Secondly, it follows that human beings . . .

. . . act always on account of an end, namely, on account of their advantage, which they want. Hence they seek to know only the final causes of what has been done, and when they have heard them, they are satisfied, because they have no reason to doubt further. But if they cannot hear them from another, nothing remains for them but to turn towards themselves, and reflect on the ends by which they are usually determined to do such things; so they necessarily judge the temperament of the other from their own temperament.⁸²

So Spinoza argues that human beings are born ignorant of the causes of things, both intrinsic and extrinsic, but that we nevertheless have wants and we know that we have wants. But, because we do not necessarily know the causes of our appetites, we confuse our ignorance of causality with an absence of causality. And in this ignorance of causality, we superimpose that of which we are aware (our appetites) onto that of which we are not aware (the intrinsic and extrinsic causes of those appetites). So, even though teleological ideals only partially convey the affections of human appetite, they are taken for intrinsic properties of extrinsic objects.

The ignorant consider them the chief attributes of things, because . . . they believe all things have been made for their sake, and call the nature of a thing good or evil, sound or rotten and corrupt, as they are affected by it. For example, if the motion the nerves receive from objects presented through the eyes is conducive to health, the objects by

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

which it is caused are called beautiful; those which cause a contrary motion are called ugly . . . Men have been so mad as to believe that God is pleased by harmony. Indeed, there are philosophers who have persuaded themselves that the motions of the heavens produce harmony.⁸³

We can see then that what is at stake in teleological thinking is the extent to which our ideas follow from the objective nature of things considered in themselves or from only relative and external points of view. If, on the one hand, the ideas of which we are capable of thinking can be conceived to follow from the essence of things considered in themselves, then we can know things as they really are and accommodate ourselves to this reality. But if, on the other hand, the kind of ideas that human beings can think are limited to the contingency in which extrinsic things affect us, then the efforts by which we strive for advantage and utility will be determined by mere “fortuitous encounters with things.”⁸⁴ Individuality, as such, would be a matter of chance allotment.

It is clear then that what is at stake in teleological ideas are the very conditions in which freedom and individuality operate. If we conceive human nature through teleological ideals, then human nature will be an intrinsically subordinate thing that requires a master to rule it and tell it what it is. Even at the beginning stages of Spinoza’s critique of teleology we can see that the *telos* for which a thing acts and exists can only be known in relation to the causes that condition it. If the human purpose, essence, or *telos* can only be conceived “in-another” then this will also constitute the conditions in which the freedom of individuality is enacted not for itself, but for sake of something else. But the irony here is that this externalization is itself the internal or

⁸³ EI appendix.

⁸⁴ EIIP29schol.

immanent mode of human causality (which Spinoza here calls appetite) only alienated from itself and now attributed to another thing. According to teleological assumptions, for example, it is not I myself that has the appetite for warmth and from which I seek out warm things, it is rather the Sun whose purpose is *to warm* which my essence thus lacks and is therefore in want of. Hence, anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism are the tell-tale signs of teleology because the very idea of a *telos* is to define a thing's objective essence through the self-alienated standard of human appetite.

If the teleologically-inclined experience the advantage of “eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light,”⁸⁵ they will understand and define the nature of these things through the purposes (or *telos*) that they appear to provide. But due to the contingency that intention always implies, teleological ideas imply that their objects could have existed in a way other than the way they do. But this is only because without a concept of necessity it would seem that things and the *telos* that singularizes and distinguishes them could have been created or designed differently by their anthropomorphic ruler.

Hence, they consider all natural things as means to their own advantage. And knowing that they had found these means, not provided them for themselves, they had reason to believe that there was someone else who had prepared those means for their use. For after they considered things as means, they could not believe that the things had made themselves; but from the means they were accustomed to prepare for themselves, they

⁸⁵ EI appendix.

had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers, of Nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.⁸⁶

Thus, it is clear why Spinoza thinks that teleology constitutes the essential logic of superstition and why it is antithetical to what he otherwise calls true religion. For, when people think teleologically the standard of true ideas (and so the idea of God itself) is rendered relative and subjective such that the intrinsic essence of a thing is confused with its contingent affects on the human body.

All these things show sufficiently that each one has judged things according to the dispositions of his brain; or rather, has accepted affections of the imagination as things [in themselves]. So it is no wonder . . . that we find so many controversies to have arisen among [people], and that, they have finally given rise to skepticism. For although human bodies agree in many things, they still differ in very many. And for that reason what seems good to one, seems bad to another.⁸⁷

If we base either religion or philosophy on teleological models then we will inevitably conceive the *telos* of things to conflict to the same degree that the appetites of those who think them differ. There would be as many divergent and opposed ideas of things as there were ways of imagining benefits from them, and since bodies differ enough such that what benefits one can harm another, there would then be no universal standard through which to understand things. The problem, however, is not in the diversity of belief but in the oppositional and conflicting nature of beliefs caused by the contingencies of temperament and appetite:

⁸⁶ EI appendix.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

So it happened that each of them has thought up from [their] own temperament different ways of worshiping God, so that God might love [them] above all the rest, and direct the whole of Nature according to the needs of their blind desire and insatiable greed. Thus this prejudice was changed into superstition, and struck deep roots in their minds. This was why each of them strove with great diligence to understand and explain the final causes of all things.⁸⁸

The problem is that teleology inevitably projects the contingencies of human appetites onto nature and then claims to rediscover them as ultimate causes (final-ends) of a universe that tends towards their personal and exclusive advantage. From this original prejudice both an epistemological problem and ethical problem follow.

Spinoza describes the epistemological side of the problem as a reversal of the causal order of Nature. “This doctrine concerning the end turns Nature completely upside down. For what is really a cause, it considers an effect, and conversely what is an effect it considers as a cause. What is by nature prior, it makes posterior. And finally, what is supreme and most perfect, it makes imperfect.”⁸⁹ The ethical aspect of the problem is that this relativistic way of thinking inevitably breeds conflict and opposition. If individuals judge the final- end or purpose of a thing’s existence based only on their limited experience of it, each will inevitably judge what is most common and universal to things from the chance coincidences of their own temperament. Ethics is reduced to the impulse of appetite such that each person judges the standard of good and evil, merit and sin, or any other “universal” idea in conflict and opposition to others.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Teleological prejudices thus constitute a logic of superstition because of the epistemological and ethical relativities they establish. By reversing the causal order according to which singular things are known, teleology inverts the causes and activities that define what things are into an absence and negation that defines things by what they lack. Furthermore, teleology constitutes a logic of superstition because it confuses the nature of the human mind with the nature of the things affecting it. Consequently, it promotes the valorization of those things over the mind that thinks it. Thus, it is clear how Spinoza's critique of teleology in the appendix to part one of the *Ethics* anticipates and prepares for the critique of false universals and perfections described in the preface of part four. "For we have shown in the Appendix of part I, that Nature does nothing on account of an end . . . What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, *or* primary cause, of something."⁹⁰ Spinoza reminds the reader of this conclusion from the earlier appendix to make clear the direct relation between teleological ideals of universality and the finite notion of perfections or wholes that they involve.

When we think teleologically, the idea of *perfection* follows as something that is relative or evaluatively comparable, but never what is absolute, whole, or complete in and of itself.

If someone has decided to make something, and has finished it, then he will call his thing perfect – and so will anyone who rightly knows, or thinks he knows, the mind and purpose of the author of the work. For example, if someone sees a work (which I suppose to be not yet completed), and knows that the purpose of the author of that work is to build a house, he will say that it is imperfect. On the other hand, he will call it perfect as soon

⁹⁰ EIV preface.

as he sees that the work has been carried through to the end which its author had decided to give it.⁹¹

If, however, someone happens to encounter something the likes of which they have not experienced, then they will “of course, not be able to know whether that work is perfect or imperfect.”⁹² Clearly then, the teleological idea of perfection refers to nothing other than the comparability of images and experiences whose truth is only relative and partial.

After [people] began to form [teleological] universal ideas, and devise models of houses, buildings, towers, and the like, and to prefer some models of things to others, it came about that each one called perfect what he saw agreed with the universal idea he had formed of this kind of thing, and imperfect, what he saw agreed less with the model he had conceived, even though its maker thought he had entirely finished it.⁹³

Hence, the teleological ideal of perfection presupposes a model from which its relative value is derived through a principle of resemblance. An individual thing is perfected or complete, therefore, not when it comes into itself as a singular and unique construct (whatever it happens to be) but rather when it can be compared to things that resemble it. Spinoza offers the example of someone building a house to illustrate this:

For example, when we say that habitation was the final cause of this or that house, surely we understand nothing but that a man, because he imagined the conveniences of domestic life, had an appetite to build a house. So habitation, insofar as it is considered as a final

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

cause, is nothing more than this singular appetite. It is really an efficient cause, which is considered as a first cause, because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites.⁹⁴

So, although we may understand what someone means when they say that “this house is perfect” – namely, that they are pleased by the house – we do not thereby properly attribute a notion of perfection, completion, or wholeness to the house itself. If we did, it would not be because the house is absolutely whole and complete without addition, as if one more item could not be added or removed. Rather, we call the house “perfect,” in this case, simply because it is a notion “we are accustomed to feign because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another.”⁹⁵

But if we do not conceive an adequate idea of perfection from our affects and appetites, then from what principle or cause does Spinoza think that we have this idea? On the one hand, either the idea of an absolute whole is purely fictional in the sense that humans have merely a relative and experiential idea of perfection and have habitually extrapolated its principle beyond its experienced domain. Or, on the other hand, it is fictional in the sense that perfection is entailed by the very existence of a mind.⁹⁶ But before we can fully appreciate what for Spinoza

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ As Curley indicates, the Latin word “*perfectus* is simply the past participle of *perficere*, to complete or finish, itself a derivative of *facere*, to make or do.” “Glossary-Index,” *The Completed Works of Spinoza, Vol. I*, 650. Curley does not, however, add what I think is extremely relevant here, namely that *facere* is also the root of the English words “fact” and “fiction.” What is so relevant to Spinoza’s thinking here is that we can understand from this etymological equivalence that the knowledge of perfection is in a way simultaneously factual and fictional. We shall see that, for Spinoza, the idea of perfection as whole or complete follows from the mind’s idea of itself. In this sense, perfection is a “fact” because it is the whole or complete foundation of a true idea. Yet, as we shall see, the mind’s idea of itself is not given in advance but develops through an effort of composition. In this sense, perfection is also a “fiction” in the sense that it must be made.

constitutes a non-teleological idea of perfection and the paradox it involves, I think it would be of benefit to further contrast Spinoza's position with that of his opponents. The next section, therefore, shall situate Spinoza's critique of teleology and the sanctuary of ignorance in Platonic philosophy itself.

In conclusion, it is evident that Spinoza's critique of teleology and what he calls the "sanctuary of ignorance" in the *Ethics* constitutes the pseudo-philosophical logic of superstition which the TPT otherwise considers from a theological-political perspective. How else would we describe the logic behind Alexander's vacillating passions if not as a teleological projection of his self-alienated appetites which are then reencountered as the final-ends of a Nature perceived to tend towards his personal advantage? If one were to somehow ask Alexander what the cause of his power was, it seems unlikely that he would answer by venerating the prowess of his generals, the bravery of his soldiers, or the charisma of his oratory. It seems to me much more likely that a confident Alexander would say something along the lines of "such is the fate of a son of Zeus." But, as Spinoza puts it, not without a touch of sarcasm:

If a stone has fallen from a roof onto someone's head and killed him, [the superstitious, much like Alexander] will show, in the following way, that the stone fell in order to kill the man. For if it did not fall to that end, God willing it, how could so many circumstances have concurred by chance . . . ? Perhaps you will answer that has happened because the wind was blowing hard and the man was walking that way. But they will persist: why was the wind blowing hard at that time? why was the man walking that way at that same time? If you answer again that the wind arose then because on the preceding day, while the weather was still calm, the sea began to toss, and that the man had been invited by a friend, they will press on – for there is no end to the questions which can be

asked: but why was the sea tossing? why was the man invited at just that time? And so they will not stop asking for the causes of causes until you take refuge in the will of God, that is, the sanctuary of ignorance.⁹⁷

b. Darker than Light but Lighter than Dark: The Contradiction of Platonic Teleology

Teleology and the mystical sanctuary of ignorance are the main pillars of superstition that Spinoza critiques in the *Ethics*, but he never cites thinkers who hold these positions in it. Instead, his criticisms are directed at basic prejudices that commonly incline people to these pseudo-intellectual dispositions. But without a philosophical antagonist to cite, readers might wonder whether Spinoza is critical of ideas that no philosopher actually supports. Therefore, in this section I shall demonstrate how teleology and the mystical sanctuary of ignorance follow in Platonic philosophy from the logic of non-contradiction. I argue that when the rule of non-contradiction is conceived as a first principle of philosophy it utterly fails to develop the content of the known and therefore fails to meet its own criteria.

Spinoza is clearly not concerned to argue against any philosopher in particular since he does not write on any one at length (except Descartes), and we should take this relative silence to indicate Spinoza's priorities and concerns. Spinoza is not concerned to argue against the dead, at least partly because they do not make for good conversation but more specifically because this would not achieve his aims. Spinoza was concerned with contemporary theologians and philosophers of his time who purported to justify religious dogma by appealing to the principles of celebrated teleological thinkers. Hence, the point of Spinoza's critique is not to censor

⁹⁷ EI appendix.

philosophers with whom he disagrees, since the *Ethics* does not even name them. Instead, the point is to prove the mutual falsification that follows from the amalgamation of fundamentally incompatible ideas. Spinoza wants to show that we cannot understand either the idea of final-ends or *causa-sui* if we try to understand one through the other because their toxic combination makes it impossible to distinguish truth from error and equally religion from superstition. Thus, before I present Spinoza's paradoxical ontology, it will be of benefit to undergo a brief excursion into Platonic philosophy to fully contrast Spinoza's ideas with the fatal confusions under which pseudo theologians and philosophers both labor.

The clearest illustrations of Platonic teleology occur in the *Republic* where Plato, through the figure of Socrates, describes the metaphysical structure of existence through the analogy of "the divided line." Everything that exists, according to the analogy of the divided line, falls within the determinant realm of two dichotomously opposing powers – the many, changeable things of the sensible but not intelligible, and the eternal and indivisible oneness of what is absolutely intelligible but not sensible.⁹⁸ For Plato, the whole structure of existence is constituted by the contradictory opposition between the many ephemeral things detected by our senses and the one, unchanging essence to which those changing sensible things partially refer and represent. And it is precisely from this partial allotment of some unchanging essence that singular things receive their existence, reality, and value as fleetingly ephemeral copies or derivations.

⁹⁸ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1992), 507b–507c. The full quote that I have paraphrased here is the following: "We say that there are many beautiful things and many good things, and so on for each kind . . . And what is the main thing, we speak of beauty itself and good itself, and so in the case of all the things that we then set down as many, we turn about and set down in accord with a single form of each, believing that there is but one, and call it 'the being' of each . . . And we say that the many beautiful things and the rest are [sensible] but not intelligible, while the forms are intelligible but not [sensible]." I have substituted "visible" for "sensible" here because the discussion that follows is not limited to sight but includes sensation in general.

It is like a line divided into two unequal sections. Then divide each section – namely, that of the [sensible] and that of the intelligible – in the same ratio as the line. In terms now of relative clarity and opacity, one subsection of the [sensible] consists of images. And by images I mean, first, shadows, then reflections in water . . . In the other subsection of the [sensible], put the originals of these images, namely, the animals around us, all the plants, and the whole class of manufactured things.⁹⁹

Plato describes the divided line in terms of a hierarchy in which the different strata refer to differing degrees of truth, being, and reality. On the “lowest” end of this line we have the human sense perception of the world which apprehends reality as a shadow of a shadow, a reflection of a reflection of some original content. And one degree above sense perception are the objects that the senses represent to us but only as they exist in themselves beyond their representation. “As the opinable is to the knowable, so the likeness is to the thing that it is like? Certainly.”¹⁰⁰ But since both our perception of objects and also those objects themselves are subject to change, neither can condition the idea of an unchanging and absolute essence (or Form) according to which the changeable is known to change. For Plato, it is only when we “step out” entirely of the sensible world in pseudo-philosophical ecstasy that the essential forms of the various things of existence can be gleaned as if through a slit. But so long as the human mind or spirit is attached to its body, according to Plato, the best it can hope for is a sort of hypothetical and probabilistic knowledge as “right opinion.” To encounter the essential Forms of things in themselves Plato insists that we must abandon the flux of sensibility and embrace the finalized totality of a thing’s ideal essence instead. The problem, however, is that the ideal essence, Form, or subject of

⁹⁹ Ibid., 509d–510a.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 510a.

representation then, according to the divided line, has no necessary connection to the objects that contingently and mysteriously represent it.

In one subsection, the soul, using as images the things that were imitates before, is forced to investigate from hypotheses, proceeding not to a first principle but to a conclusion. In the other subsection, however, it makes its way to a first principle that is *not* a hypothesis, proceeding from a hypothesis but without the images used in the previous subsection, using forms themselves and making its investigations through them.¹⁰¹

This transcendence of the ideal over the sensible is what characterizes Platonism, and it runs through all of Plato's mature myths and dialogues, all of which display the same pseudo-philosophical tendency: Plato, through the paternal figure of Socrates, at once *explains* and *mystifies* the conditions and contents of knowledge. Something is explained insofar as it is held to the standard of its essential Form (*telos*), but precisely what the contents of that Form are and how it relates to and determines its object remains utterly unknowable.

The logic that Plato uses to justify his cosmic dichotomies (ruler/ruled, soul/body, one/many, etc.) is what is commonly referred to as the law of non-contradiction. Although the law of non-contradiction is more commonly associated with Aristotle, it first appears in Plato. According to Plato, it is only from the appearance of a contradiction that two things can be known to be "the same or different."¹⁰² Plato explains that contradiction is the epistemic principle through which we identify the essential Form of existing things. When an interlocutor asks Plato what distinguishes one thing from another, Plato has Socrates tell us: "It is obvious

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 510b.

¹⁰² Ibid., 436b.

that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time. So, if we ever find this happening in the soul, we'll know that we aren't dealing with one thing but many."¹⁰³ If we are dealing with one thing, then we are dealing with an intelligible Form, but if we are dealing with many things, then we are dealing with the many shadowy illusions of the sensible. Hence, for Plato the singular is related to the multiple as the true is related to the false.

Plato thus uses the principle of non-contradiction to determine the *telos* or final-cause of particular things since it is conceived that things of the same nature cannot undergo or be attributed opposing predicates at the same time. Hypothetically, therefore, the final cause that determines a thing in its essential Form can be known by exorcising its contradictory properties from its idea. The final-cause of the essential Form of a house, for example, would be known by removing the causes that contradict habitation. Hence, if this building is at this moment in time a "house" it is because it is not a morgue, stadium, market, parliament, etc. But what Plato actually demonstrates through the principle of non-contradiction is that so long as he lives and is attached to his body, his ideas of the Forms will always be contradicted by his bodily perception of their many representatives. Therefore, Plato remains ignorant regarding the essential contents of Forms because his body involves the many corruptions of sensation, and the Forms involve an intelligible singularity that resists all corporeal multiplicity. And since, "it is obvious that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time,"¹⁰⁴ Plato cannot know the very oppositions and contradictions

¹⁰³ Ibid., 436b–436c.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

that determine him as the individual thing that he essentially is. Plato thus claims to know *that* he is contradicted, but he cannot know *what* or *who* he is contradicted by.

Plato uses the rule of non-contradiction as the standard with which to deem Socrates the wisest man in all of Athens, since only Socrates knows that he knows nothing.¹⁰⁵ Plato's version of Socrates therefore does not consider himself a philosopher in the traditional sense of the word because he can neither claim to love nor possess wisdom or knowledge. According to the rule of non-contradiction, love and desire follow not from what a thing essentially is but from what a thing essentially lacks. That is, according to the rule of non-contradiction it is impossible to possess what one desires and equally impossible to desire what one possesses, since to possess is to have and to desire is to have not. Hence, possessing what is desired attributes a contradiction to one and the same thing at the same time such that it constitutes a middle term between presence and absence, between having and not having. But the rule of non-contradiction prohibits and excludes such contradictory middle terms. Therefore, if a philosopher should want for knowledge, then that very desire will expose the fact that they are really ignorant since the wise would not desire wisdom if they possessed it. For example, if Socrates desires to know the good, all that can be concluded from this desire is that he hopelessly lacks it and is therefore

¹⁰⁵ "What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom more than human else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it . . . Chairephon . . . went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle . . . if any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian [oracle] replied that no one was wiser . . . I went to one of those reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle . . . Then, when I examined this man – there is no need for me to tell you his name, he was one of our public men . . . I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not . . . So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know" . . . After the politicians, I went to the poets . . . I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent . . . So there again I withdrew, thinking that I had the same advantage over them as I had over the politicians." Plato, "The Apology," in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: from Thales to Aristotle*, 2nd ed., trans. G.M.A. Grube, ed. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 20e–21c, 112–130.

ignorant of it. Accordingly then, philosophy should not be described as a love of wisdom but rather as a love for the appearance of right opinions that the ignorant can subsequently adopt. Philosophy as such is not the joy of understanding but a desperation for better opinions. “We won’t be in error, then, if we call such people lovers of opinion rather than philosophers or lovers of wisdom and knowledge? Will they be angry with us if we call them that? Not if they take [Socrates’] advice, for it isn’t right to be angry with those who speak the truth.”¹⁰⁶ Perhaps, however, Plato should have had Socrates say: “for it isn’t right to be angry with those who speak with the *resemblance of truth*.”

Let us consider, for example, Plato’s idea of “the good” since he writes that “if we don’t know it, even the fullest possible knowledge of other things is of no benefit to us, any more than if we acquire any possession without the good of it.”¹⁰⁷ According to Plato, it is always for the sake of the good that “every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake.”¹⁰⁸ The good, for Plato, is thus the *telos* or that for the sake of which things act. But when pressed to say what he thinks is the absolute standard of the good, or that by which we can identify the essential Form of the good, Socrates states that he does not know and can say only what he thinks as a matter of opinion. Socrates immediately reminds his audience here of the lesson they were supposed to have learned from the analogy of the divided line. “Haven’t you noticed that opinions without knowledge are shameful and ugly things? The best of them are blind – or do you think that those who express a true opinion without understanding are any different from

¹⁰⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 480.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 505.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 505e.

blind people who happen to travel the right road?”¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, Socrates is implored to continue delivering his (as we know, blind) opinion to his interlocutors. But as illustrated by the divided line, Socrates can have no knowledge of the good in-itself but only a corrupted knowledge of its many representations, shadows, and copies. Socrates thus requests, “let’s abandon the quest for what the good itself is for the time being . . . But I am willing to tell you about what is apparently an offspring of the good and most like it.”¹¹⁰ So, what Socrates proceeds to discuss is not the essential Form of the good since he does not know what it is. Instead, Socrates considers what most *resembles* the Form of the good *in his opinion*, which he calls “the apparent offspring of the good.” But, according to logic that Plato has set up, even this hazy and distorted opinion is completely unknowable because Plato’s Socrates declares that “the many beautiful things and the rest are [sensible] but not intelligible, while the forms are intelligible but not [sensible].”¹¹¹ Thus, as soon as Socrates opens his mouth and utters sounds composed of a multiplicity of decomposable parts, his many opinions may be said and heard but cannot be understood, and the Forms to which they refer might be known in some shadowy intellectual vision but could never be said or heard. Socrates cannot speak without contradicting what he is speaking of.

We can see an identically contradictory structure if we apply the rule of non-contradiction to Plato’s contradictory notion of “right opinion,” which we have already seen Socrates allude to through the analogy of a blind man who happens to find himself on the right road. But recall that the rule of non-contradiction states that one thing is distinguished from

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 506c.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 506e.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 507b.

another according to the impossibility in which the same thing can be attributed opposite properties at the same time. Yet, it turns out that this is exactly how Socrates defines the notion of right opinion or that which most resembles knowledge. When Socrates inquires about the absolute Form of knowledge, or the knowledge of knowledge, he asks whether the Form of knowledge refers to some actually existing thing or to nothing. That is, since the Form of knowledge must have a special status, what *kind* of knowledge does it refer to? Does the object of absolute knowledge exist as the knowledge of something which *is* or of something which *is not*? Socrates' interlocutors are assured that if a pure knowledge of knowledge exists, then, since knowledge is always the knowledge of some actually existing thing, then the Form of knowledge must be a knowledge of the existence of knowledge. Pure knowledge will therefore refer to what *is* while pure ignorance will therefore refer to what *is not*. What then occupies the space between the dichotomy of knowledge and ignorance?

Now, if anything is such as to be and also not to be, won't it be intermediate between what purely is and what in no way is? . . . Then, as knowledge is set over what is, while ignorance is of necessity set over what is not, mustn't we find an intermediate between knowledge and ignorance to be set over what is intermediate between what is and what is not, if there is such a thing?¹¹²

With this hypothesis seeming likely, Socrates and his interlocutors confess the probable existence of right opinion. But notice, therefore, the contradiction according to which a knowledge of opinion is opined as that which simultaneously *is* and *is not*. Opinion, insofar as it can be known, and which is the best thing mortals like Socrates can approximate, is the middle

¹¹² Ibid., 477b.

term between something and nothing. Opinion, as such, appears to Plato's version of Socrates "to be darker than knowledge, but clearer than ignorance,"¹¹³ which we may then say is darker than light but lighter than darkness. Right opinion is thus at once clear and confused, light and dark, true and false. So much for the pretense of an excluded middle!

According to Plato's Socratic dialogues there is no human knowledge of things as they are in themselves. Instead, we have available to us by chance coincidence only corrupted and partial opinions of things that are either more or less probable but with no way to confirm that apparent probability. Although opinions are always bad and blind, it is all Socrates can offer because he has no knowledge of knowledge, but only of what, in his opinion, it might resemble. Yet, based on the rule of non-contradiction from which these distinctions are supposed to have followed, Socrates cannot not even have a knowledge (opinion) of opinion since the nature of opinion is formed by the simultaneous attribution of opposite properties. Hence, even though Plato employs the character of Socrates to illustrate the philosophical ascension of the divided line, his protagonist is always returned to the contradictory ignorance from which he began. Plato contradicts the very rule of non-contradiction itself because the separation of final-ends from initial means involves the striving of those means for a thing that they lack entirely and therefore strive for in ignorance. Even the *telos* of the essential Forms themselves are subject to contradiction since in apparent self-possession they are completely undesirable and so of no sensible use to those who desire them.

Thus, we can see how the Plato's mystical sanctuary of ignorance and teleology depends on a rule of non-contradiction. Non-contradiction was supposed to function as the guiding

¹¹³ Ibid., 478c.

principle of Plato's theory of distinction and therefore that in light of which a thing's final-end (*telos*) is known. But since the rule defines desire and determination negatively as the expression of what a thing lacks and therefore pursues in ignorance, the *telos* by which things are distinguished is shrouded in an impenetrably mysterious fog in which anything and everything can be excused under the sanctuary of ignorance. Therefore, insofar as it is conceived as a first principle, the rule of non-contradiction contradicts its own premises and thereby undermines itself as a principle. If non-contradiction is the first standard of knowledge, the only thing we will "know," like the Platonic Socrates, is that we know nothing.

Plato's Socratic dialogues reflect an identical conceptual structure to the parable of the Cretan liar.¹¹⁴ The parable is classically attributed to Epimenides who, being Cretan himself, declared that all Cretans are liars, but the question is whether or not that is a lie. If he is from Crete then it is true that he is Cretan, but if it is true that he is a Cretan then he, according to the rule, must be lying about all Cretans being liars. Alternatively, if he is lying about the Cretans being liars then he signals his Cretan nativity by speaking falsely of the Cretans, and thus may be telling the truth.¹¹⁵ And so, the wheel of contradiction turns without ever developing the content of the known because the knower and the known are conceived to relate through contradictory opposition. But this philosophical structure of opposition is not limited only to

¹¹⁴ Referring to Plato's *Symposium*, Polka writes: "Does the wildly drunk Alcibiades, then, like the Cretan liar, lie or tell the truth about Socrates? If (as) he lies about Socrates, he tells the truth (in speaking falsely about Socrates, in speaking in ignorance of his subject.) If (as) he tells the truth about Socrates, he lies (in speaking truly about Socrates, in speaking in knowledge of his subject). Each of Alcibiades' opposed or contradictory representations of Socrates is true, and each is false – from opposed (contradictory) points of view. For there is never to be found in the Greek world a common point of view, a universal perspective that comprehends both itself and the other, both thought and existence, in a mutually reciprocal relationship, one in terms of which truth can be distinguished from falsehood." *Between Philosophy and Religion, Volume I*, 149.

¹¹⁵ "The Cretan, Epimenides, said 'All Cretans are liars.' But Epimenides is a Cretan, therefore *he* is a liar and, consequently, his assertion is false. *Ergo*, Cretans are *not* liars – and this implies that Epimenides did not lie but spoke truly." Alexandre Koyré, "The Liar," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 6, no. 3 (1946): 344.

these Platonic dialogues, or even to Plato himself. We can find an identical conceptual structure in Platonic texts like, for example, the *Apology*,¹¹⁶ *Crito*,¹¹⁷ and the *Phaedo*.¹¹⁸

In all of these Platonic dialogues, the Socratic strategy is always to never declare a positive judgement since it is in making the claims of judgement that one exposes oneself to the ridicule of contradictory opinion. So long as Socrates does not claim to know anything with certainty save for his own ignorance, and he professes that ignorance in a passionless disposition, Socrates will claim to be beyond the cycle of contradiction, beyond the fickleness of life. Since it is only in seeking and desiring that things are inevitably contradicted by their opposites, so long as Socrates remains intellectually motionless, seeks, and desires nothing, he remains uncontradicted. Of course, the irony that we can see is that Socrates is nonetheless contradicted by his claim to non-contradiction, but he simply does not know it. It is precisely this attitude that I, following the work of Brayton Polka, find to permeate ancient philosophy and which is shared

¹¹⁶ Plato, “Apology,” in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2002). When the Athenian jury condemns Socrates to death, they in fact support his position that evil is done in ignorance of the good and that it is better for Socrates to suffer wrong in knowledge of it than to commit evil (as the jury does) in ignorance.

¹¹⁷ Plato, “Crito,” in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2002). Socrates suggests that the one who knows is opposed to the ignorant many who are therefore “not to be valued” (47a). The ideas of the just and the unjust that Socrates and Crito discuss in the prison cell are therefore entirely interchangeable insofar as the one who acts always does so at the suffering of the many. According to Socrates, it is better then to do nothing, to not act since any action involves suffering: that is, the suffering either of the city state by corrupting its laws and judgements, the suffering of Socrates’ friends and family by capitulating to his sentence, and lastly the suffering of his very soul both by committing evil in ignorance and also by what may be a missed opportunity for a better existence in death untethered and polluted by bodily senses.

¹¹⁸ Plato, “Phaedo,” in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2002). Socrates argues that since sensibility is a perversion and a corruption of pure knowledge there can be no absolute knowledge so long as the body endures. Philosophy, as a love of wisdom, therefore, cannot be realized in the flux of life but is instead a learning to die by the soul (see 65d–67b).

among its various schools and thinkers, be they Stoics,¹¹⁹ Epicureans,¹²⁰ Aristotelians,¹²¹ etc. Ancient philosophy characteristically begins, like Plato does, with oppositional relations that consistently conclude in ignorance from which judgement must be indefinitely suspended.

So far, in this chapter I have sought to convey Spinoza's critique of teleology and the mystical sanctuary of ignorance so to explain why Spinoza denounces philosophers and biblical "scholars" who rely on the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. In this section in particular, I sought to demonstrate what Spinoza did not, which was to situate this critique in Platonic philosophy itself. My overall aim, however, has been to contrast the ostensibly "Greek" logic of non-contradiction with Spinoza's logic of paradox which I shall present in the following section. Again, Spinoza is arguing not against Plato or Aristotle but against theologians and philosophers who use Platonic and Aristotelian principles to sanction their preconceived religious and political biases under the pretense of an infallible authority.

It seems appropriate now to ask if teleology and the sanctuary of ignorance are so philosophically suspect, why have people revered it so thoroughly throughout the history of

¹¹⁹ "The stance of Socrates is not fundamentally different from that of the skeptics and of the Stoics, for whom, also, the sole liberation from contradiction (of and by the senses) is suspension of judgement, suspension of the passions – whence the passionless identity on the part of the Stoics." Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion, Volume I*, 148.

¹²⁰ "As for the Epicureans, they too, suspend their judgement in contradictory opposition to their enemies, the skeptics and the Stoics. In following in the tradition of Heraclitus and thus in reducing their reason to the passions (to the pleasures of the natural senses), the Epicureans render everything that is knowable to the senses a dogma of knowledge that cannot be doubted or judged by reason." *Ibid.*, 149.

¹²¹ "Aristotle, for his part, typically oscillates between the contradictory opposites of the one of Parmenides (reason) and the flux (many) of Heraclitus (passion). In the one case, the rational, unchanging one of the *Metaphysics* – God: thought thinking itself – reduces the multiple, changing passions to ignorance of the one. In the opposite case . . . the *Nichomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* are also founded on this middle way [of *doxa* or right opinion], for which, as he acknowledges, there is absolutely no philosophical justification and which is ultimately relative to and dependent on power (birth, which is both unjustified and unjustifiable). We can well understand, then, that, as Aristotle points out in book III of the *Politics*, the *good* man, the man who is good in himself, has no place as merely a relatively good citizen in any one of the six existing but merely relatively good political regimes – monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic, together with their corrupt opposites – whose *stasis*, in lacking the good, is that they fatally revolve into one another without ever altering their blind dependence on the law of contradiction." *Ibid.*, 150–159.

European philosophy and religious thought? Although this is a topic subject to historical debate, I think that for Spinoza it largely comes down to the effect that mistrust has on relations of interpretation, and in particular the psychological consequence of prejudicial indulgence. For, if we did not trust that others (or possibly even ourselves) had an immanent capacity for truth, then why would we expose ourselves to the futility of debate? Of course, the history of European philosophy and religious thought does not lack a proclivity for debate. What it has undeniably lacked, although in lesser or greater degrees, is an unhindered exchange of ideas and an uncensored freedom of communication between socio-political equals. Therefore, the conditions of debate, however common those debates may be, are often insulated by bias and mediated by social standing in such a way that the debate is more of a performance than a practice in understanding. This is especially true when differences of belief are mediated by difference in power, hence the platitude that people do not always say what they think, nor do they always think what they say.

So, am I suggesting that teleology has propagated into so many corners of thought simply because it has gone unchallenged? No, of course not, that would be an absurd and dubious argument. I am suggesting that the logic of teleology serves the very particular interests of an exclusive elite. Whether those elite be pontiffs, priests, kings, philosopher-kings, aristocrats, presidents, or senators, teleological premises always serve to justify, legitimate, and naturalize the divinely sanctioned rights of a select few. This is why the teleological ideal of transcendent final-ends and unerring authorities inherently inclines towards oppressive socio-political

conditions wherein the total authority of a sovereign is as unquestioned as its people are censored and repressed.¹²² The appeal of teleology, therefore, is identical to the appeal of total authority.

Spinoza shows that with sufficient manipulation and censorship, the mysticism inherent to teleology constructs a sanctuary of ignorance by the can be instrumentalized to shelter a complacency that subdues dissent and establishes an apparently homologous conformity of interpretation. For, how can one disagree with and protest against what one does not and cannot understand, especially when such mystery appears to naturalize and justify a given status quo as the effect of a divine will no less permanent than any other natural law. Protesting the will of the sovereign as such would be as absurd as protesting the warmth of the sun, or of the habitation of houses. Yet, at the same time, the mystery of it all must also be tightly controlled so to establish an orthodoxy, that is, a *right opinion*. Too much mystery allows for too much relativity in doctrinal interpretation which ultimately dissolves the totality at which it aims. “To avoid this evil [of inconstancy], immense zeal is brought to bear to embellish religion – whether the religion is true or illusory – with ceremony and pomp, so that it will be thought to have greater weight than any other influence, and so that everyone will always worship it with the utmost deference.”¹²³

We can therefore explain that many defer to the ideals of teleology for at least two reasons: either because they have been kept emotionally and intellectually repressed in a state of fear, or because in their conscious or unconscious adoption of these biases and prejudices they

¹²² “The greatest secret of monarchic rule, and its main interest, is to keep men deceived, and to cloak in the specious name of Religion the fear by which they must be checked, so that they will fight for slavery as they would for their survival, and will think it not shameful, but a most honorable achievement, to give their life and blood that one man may have a ground for boasting.” TPT preface.10.

¹²³ TPT preface.9.

stand to benefit from some exclusive good. Again, whether the *telos* is dictated by a philosopher in the name of reason or by a theologian in the name of God, or a politician in the name of the state, the exclusivity in which that purpose is conceived means that it will be guarded and coveted by the authority of an elite class. This elite class will thus exercise their power through the exclusive authority to interpret a set of dictates that mete out benefits and advantages exclusively to those who approximately resemble their prejudicial opinions. For, the teleological truth of an ideal is exactly like the child who, in Socrates' opinion, is good simply because she resembles the good. But based merely on a principle of resemblance, "each man's faith is known more easily from . . . the external dress and adornment of his body, or because he frequents this or that Place of Worship, or because he's attached to this or that opinion."¹²⁴ But since the religious value expressed by resemblance is predicated only on the arbitrary affects of appetite, what that likeness actually resembles is subject to change and therefore subject to contradiction. "It is no wonder then, that [almost] nothing has remained of the old Religion but its external ceremony, by which the common people seem more to flatter God than to worship him."¹²⁵

In a way that mirrors Plato's depiction of Socrates exactly, Spinoza's opponents account for truth and error by taking refuge in the ignorance of a God whose totality would be beyond human understanding and existence, and so beyond dispute. The irony, however, is that they take refuge in ignorance so as to protect God from human ignorance, but in so doing they reduce the very standard by which God is known to that of ignorance itself. The assumed incapacity of the human to conceive the divine means that the divine can be erroneously taken for the human, and

¹²⁴ TPT preface.14.

¹²⁵ TPT preface.16. I add "almost" in square brackets here because we will see in the subsequent chapter that it is not Spinoza's final view that nothing has reached us uncorrupted except ceremony. We shall see later that Spinoza argues that the substantial contents of religion and faith are indeed incorruptible.

vice versa. Therefore, to claim that God is supernatural, that God must exist outside the laws of nature in unknowably mysterious ways, is to base the rule according to which we distinguish the true from the false, and the good from the bad on a complacent ignorance. This is why Spinoza writes in the preface to part three of the *Ethics*:

Most of those who have written about the affects, and [the human] way of living, seem to treat, not of natural things, which follow the common laws of Nature, but of things which are outside Nature. Indeed they seem to conceive [humans] in Nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that [the human] disturbs, rather than follows, the order of Nature, that [they have an] absolute power over [their] actions, and that [they] are determined only by [themselves]. And they attribute the cause of human impotence and inconstancy, not to the common power of Nature, but to I know not what vice of human nature, which they therefore bewail, or laugh at, or disdain, or (as usually happens) curse. And he who knows how to censure more eloquently and cunningly the weakness of the human mind is held to be godly.¹²⁶

Thus, for Spinoza, the question of interpretation should not be how to censure and repress the affects of human nature by allocating their causes to the other side of a teleologically divided line. The question should be how to account for, engage, and appropriate error and affect into the affirmable and necessary aspects of our nature.

So what do Spinoza and his opponents share that can serve as a standard of their disagreement? This is a difficult question to answer because Spinoza did not tend to name his

¹²⁶ EIII preface.

opponents directly. In his second translator's note in chapter fifteen,¹²⁷ Curley refers the reader to the 1995 study by Preus who "argued persuasively that in criticizing 'Alfakhar' Spinoza is really attacking certain contemporary opponents, orthodox Calvinists, whose views it was safer for Spinoza to discuss under the cover of representing them as the views of a Jewish philosopher." However plausible this may be, I am not sympathetic to attributing to Spinoza covert aims that he does not explicitly state. The anonymity of the TPT's initial publication does, of course, suggest that Spinoza was acutely aware of the dangers he would face in explicitly naming names, thus lending plausibility to Preus' argument. One way or another, however, the question is peripheral to the skeptical/dogmatic position that Spinoza is critical of, regardless of who its particular author(s) might be. Therefore, I do not think that knowing the names of these unnamed opponents is as important as understanding Spinoza's opposition to their ideas.

It seems to me that Spinoza and his opponents share a common interest in the standards of interpretation, that is, the standard from which to identify, correct, and become responsible for error and vice. So, if Spinoza's opponents account for error and vice through the principles of teleology and non-contradiction, what according to Spinoza would constitute a better standard of interpretation? Would this standard be external to the ideas that we already have such that true interpretations require a transcendent and unerring external authority to whom all judgement is deferred? But if this were the case, by what standard would we judge the infallibility of that authority? Would this be a standard of which we were ignorant or a standard of which we were certain? If the latter, what would be the conditions of that certainty? Would it be based on the contingency of a promise that we had no power to realize ourselves and for which we could only

¹²⁷ *Spinoza Collected Works*, Volume II, 272–73.

hope and/or fear? Or, alternatively, would that certainty be based on the intrinsic powers that follow from what human beings inherently are?

c. The Paradox of Immanence

I argue that Spinoza's ontological argument is constituted by a logic of mutual entailment between the idea God and the thinking human individual. I call this logic of mutual entailment the *paradox of immanence* for two primary reasons. Firstly, I use the term *paradox* to establish a contrast with the logic of non-contradiction which denies that opposing properties can apply to the same subject at the same time. For, we will see that although the human individual is not God and God is not a human individual, neither can be conceived without the other and therefore both must be attributed to the same subject at the same time. Secondly, I use the term *immanence* to contrast the intrinsic and undivided nature of this relation with the extrinsic and divided standard of Plato's divided line. Contrary to the teleological ideals critiqued in the previous sections, Spinoza conceives the whole of existence, including the thinking individual, through the ontological axiom that "whatever is, is either in itself or in another."¹²⁸ The paradox of this axiom is that although human beings are modified things that exist in-another, we nonetheless possess a true idea of that modification which exists in-itself.¹²⁹ I argue, therefore, that Spinoza's foundational axiom would be better formulated as *whatever is, is either in itself, in another, or both at once*.

¹²⁸ EIA1.

¹²⁹ "For by substance [we should] understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that the knowledge of which does not require the knowledge of any other thing. But by modifications [we should] understand what is in another, those things whose concept is formed from the concept of the thing in which they are." EIP8schol.II.

In the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza (in)famously proposed to investigate the causes and conditions of affects like “hate, anger, envy, and the like” by using the geometrical/synthetic method of reasoning “as if it were a question of lines, planes and bodies.”¹³⁰ After all, emotions “follow with 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 . . .”¹³¹ But, although Spinoza does indeed explain the causes and properties of human nature “geometrically,” the fundamental principle on which these causes and properties depend is not itself known according to the same geometric or deductive standard.

If a conclusion is deduced from a premise, then that very deduction is facilitated by the bridging of a separation that designates the relation between the premise and conclusion artificial at best and arbitrary at worst. This does not mean that deduction or synthetic reason is inherently dubious,¹³² since it is at least more certain than the probabilistic knowledge afforded by induction. It does, however, mean that synthetic reason can only express a necessity of things that are externally determined “in another” or that are not necessarily connected by virtue of their definition. Deduction therefore is incapable of expressing a knowledge of what is absolute and “in itself” because its function is to determine the relation between relative terms such that their truth value is external to the terms themselves.¹³³ This is precisely why Spinoza does not (and could not) begin the *Ethics* with a deductive formula for the absolute knowledge of God or

¹³⁰ EIII preface.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Spinoza obviously heavily invests his ideas in the geometrical/deductive method of reasoning given that this is the predominant form in which the *Ethics* is written.

¹³³ The classical example, of course, being: If Socrates is a man, and all men are mortal, then Socrates must be mortal. The truth value of the syllogism is therefore determined by the relation of the terms “man” and “mortal” whose ideas are separate and not necessarily connected by virtue of their definitions but only through the contingent relation of their deductive coupling.

substance. Instead, the first axiom of the *Ethics*, on which every definition and proposition in it depends, constitutes the very structure of Spinoza's thought but it is not itself deduced from anything better known.¹³⁴ I shall therefore explain why the first axiom of the *Ethics* can neither be understood as a hypothetical syllogism retroactively justified by its conclusion, nor a dogmatic statement justified in advanced by an authority. Instead, I argue that the axiom "whatever is, is either in itself or in another"¹³⁵ constitutes an intuitive and paradoxical standard according to which human beings necessarily have an adequate idea of themselves, God, and external things.¹³⁶

If we take EIA1 to be the premise of a syllogism that seeks to justify itself in its conclusion, then we will have committed ourselves to a fatal flaw. This is because if we separate the premise from the conclusion and deduce the latter from the former according to the syllogistic structure of reasoning then neither will have been conceived as their own standard but from the standard of something else. For, the premise is the standard of the conclusion but what is the standard of the premise? Surely, the premise is itself the conclusion of some other premise to which it is not necessarily connected. But if a premise is only retroactively justified by the apparent inevitability and final-end of its conclusion, then we have committed ourselves to a teleological form of thinking that externalizes its standard from itself, and which will quickly

¹³⁴ As Descartes puts it: "For there is this difference between the two cases, viz. that the primary notions that are the presuppositions of geometrical proofs harmonize with the use of our sense, and are readily granted by all. Hence, no difficulty is involved in this case, except in the proper deduction of the consequences . . . On the contrary, nothing in metaphysics causes more trouble than the making the perception of its primary notions clear and distinct." René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. with an introduction by Stanley Tweyman (1993; reis. Toronto: York University Bookstore, 2019), Reply to Objections II, 102.

¹³⁵ EIA1.

¹³⁶ "The human mind has ideas from which it perceives itself, its own body, and eternal bodies as actually existing. And so it has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence." EIIP47dem. "From this we see that God's infinite essence and his eternity are known to all." EIIP47schol.

collapse into an infinite regression of causes/effects. Thus, if EIA1 functioned as either a hypothetical deductive syllogism or a simple dogmatic statement then it would be unable to account for itself and would have to refer its standard to another thing indefinitely. Neither method therefore can express the paradox of a thing that is its own standard which Spinoza insists must be known in order to know anything with certainty.

Following Descartes' claim to have revolutionized the standards of understanding,¹³⁷ Spinoza's ontological argument adopts a strikingly similar logic to Descartes' *Cogito*. Both hold that thought must be conceived as its own standard because the idea of thought is thought through itself and therefore does not require the idea of another thing in order to have a true idea about itself. Spinoza outlines this logic in *Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy"* where he describes the methodological utility of hyperbolic doubt that Descartes employed after realizing the dubiousness of sense-perception. After realizing the fragility of sense-perception and that many of his ideals had been based on standards that were either completely arbitrary (when, where, he happened to exist, etc.) or of which he was entirely ignorant. Descartes understood that true knowledge required a "certainty [that] depends on other principles, of which we are more certain."¹³⁸ In his pursuit to ascertain what these unshakably true principles might be, Descartes thought it necessary to doubt "all universals, such as corporeal nature in general, and its extension, figure, quantity, and also all Mathematical truths. And though these seemed more certain to him than all those he had derived from the senses, nevertheless he discovered a reason

¹³⁷ "I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence *to build anew from the foundation*, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences." Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation I, 45.

¹³⁸ PDPI prolegomenon I/142.

for doubting.”¹³⁹ The reason Descartes found for doubting these seemingly objective universals is that it remained at least hypothetically possible that something external and more powerful than himself could have deceived him in all such externally dependent things. Therefore, to account for the metaphysical possibility of deception by an evil genius or demon, *everything* must be brought under the scrutiny of doubt so to see if anything can pass its test. Is there anything that absolutely cannot be doubted? According to Descartes’ logic, if something absolutely cannot be doubted then it must be true, but if, even a sliver of a doubt remains then its truth is not yet clear and distinct, and so it cannot yet be affirmed absolutely.¹⁴⁰

Although Descartes had applied the method of hyperbolic doubt to all of sense-perception and even to universal ideas which did not rely on the senses like the rules of mathematics, there was still something that he had not yet doubted – namely, “he himself who was doubting in this way. Not himself insofar as he consisted of a head, hands, and the other members of the body, since he had [already] doubted these things, but only himself insofar as he was doubting, thinking, etc.”¹⁴¹ Yet, in so doubting himself Descartes discovered something unique and irreducible about the relation of an idea that takes itself as both its own subject and object, namely that it could not be doubted in the way that the other ideas could.

For whether he thinks waking or sleeping, he still thinks and is. And though others, and even he himself had erred concerning other things, since they were erring, they were. Nor could he feign any author of his nature so [powerful] as to deceive him about this. For it

¹³⁹ PDPI prolegomenon I/143.

¹⁴⁰ “I ought no less carefully to withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false, if I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will suffice to justify my rejecting the whole.” Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation I, 46.

¹⁴¹ PDPI prolegomenon I/143.

will have to be conceded that he exists, so long as it is supposed that he is deceived . . .
 So in whatever direction he turns in order to doubt, he is forced to break out with these words: *I doubt, I think, therefore I am.*¹⁴²

Thus, in so discovering an absolute relation between an idea that is both its own subject and object and which therefore depends on nothing outside of itself, “he had at the same time discovered the foundation of all the sciences, and also the measure and rule of all other truths: *Whatever is perceived as clearly and distinctly as that is true.*”¹⁴³

Descartes’ *Cogito* thus provides an absolute foundation and standard of truth because its certainty is not predicated on anything outside of itself such that it could be intercepted and corrupted by an external deception. If its truth *were* predicated on something separate from itself, then it would be that very separation between its subject and object or between the thought and what is thought about that would render the relation dubious. The separation that exists, for example, between the idea of a tree and its objective referent means that the connection between the idea and its object could be simply based on the fragility of sense-perception or intercepted and corrupted by an extrinsic deception. In contrast, however, the necessary connection that the *Cogito* has to itself means that its content refers only to the absolute and necessary connection between what thought is and what is thought. The *Cogito* therefore involves a logic of self-entailment because if the cogito is doubted, it is thought, and if it is thought, it is demonstrated. Hence:

¹⁴² PDPI prolegomenon I/144.

¹⁴³ PDPI prolegomenon I/144. It should be noted that the distinction that Spinoza makes between “concept” and “percept” in EIID3 should be retroactively applied to this formulation so that it should read: Whatever is *conceived* as clearly and distinctly as that is true.

This formula, *I doubt, I think, therefore I am*, is not a syllogism in which the major premise is omitted. For if it were a syllogism, the premises would have to be clearer and better known than the conclusion itself, *therefore I am*. And so, *I am* would not be the first foundation of all knowledge. Moreover, it would not be a certain conclusion. For its truth would depend on universal premises which the Author had previously put in doubt. So *I think, therefore I am* is a single proposition which is equivalent to this, *I am thinking*.¹⁴⁴

Spinoza thus follows Descartes' lead in grounding the first principle of knowledge on the ontological equivalence between thought and existence on which all other exercises of knowledge depend.¹⁴⁵ That we think and that thought is a necessary attribute of our existence is not a proposition in need of a demonstration because its demonstration is expressed by its premise with which it is identical. Spinoza therefore neither deduces nor induces the necessary entailment between thought and existence but posits it as a self-evident axiom: "man thinks [NS: or, to put it differently, we know that we think]."¹⁴⁶ If the relation between thought and existence

¹⁴⁴ PDPI prolegomenon I/144.

¹⁴⁵ This is not the appropriate place to rigorously treat the nuanced relationship that Spinoza has to Descartes' philosophy. Suffice it to say, however, that Spinoza inherits *much* from Descartes' thinking but interprets his ideas in fundamentally decentralized ways that install significant differences in their respective philosophical systems. For example, the Cartesian account of error provided in Meditation IV explains that errors occur in consciousness because the faculty of will extends more widely than our faculty of understanding. "Whence then come my errors? They come from the sole fact that since the will is much wider in its range and compass than the understanding, I do not restrain it within the same bounds, but extend it also to things which I do not understand . . ." *Meditations IV*, 77. As I explain at length in chapter 4.c of this study, Spinoza allows no such distinction between the intellect and the will but conflates the two in his concept of desire. And yet, the significance of this difference notwithstanding, both Descartes and Spinoza define error through a kind of privation: ". . . it is in the misuse of the free-will that the privation which constitutes the characteristic nature of error is met with. Privation, I say, is found in the act, insofar as it proceeds from me, but it is not found in the faculty which I have received from God, nor even in the act insofar as it depends on Him." *Meditations IV*, 78; "Falsity consists only in the privation of knowledge which inadequate ideas involve, and they do not have anything positive on account of which they are called false. On the contrary, insofar as they are related to God, they are true." EIVP1dem.

¹⁴⁶ EIIA2.

could be extrinsically separated by a Platonic divided-line, there would be no concrete standard from which to distinguish one side of the line from the other, or indeed from which to conceive the division in the first place. “Right opinions” would be the best human knowledge could hope to approximate but would never be able to confirm since the contents of true ideas would be cut off from the thought that thinks it, shrouded in the relativistic fog of mystery. But because we know certainly that we think, we also know certainly that we are, and because this necessary correspondence between thought and existence does not require an external standard from which it is perfectly known, we also know that this idea follows from our nature wholly considered in itself. In other words, a human being can adequately conceive the truth of their existence without recourse to another thing on which the truth of that idea is based.

Yet, Spinoza clearly defines his idea of God or substance, not the human being, as “what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.”¹⁴⁷ But, if human beings can conceive the idea of themselves without the aid of another thing from which that idea is formed, then this also means that the standard of human knowledge is commensurable with God – that is, with the Absolute whole of existence. However, if this is what Spinoza argues then it seems that a slew of contradictions would immediately follow. First and foremost, “in Nature there cannot be two or more substance of the same nature or attribute.”¹⁴⁸ So, if the necessary entailment of human thought is identical to the necessity with which God knows God to exist *causa sui*, then why are there not as many substances of the same nature or attribute as there are people?

¹⁴⁷ EID3.

¹⁴⁸ EIP5.

The existence of individual human beings does not constitute the existence of multiple substances because “that thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature. For example, a body is called finite because we always conceive another that is greater.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, human beings are not substances because we are finite and so can only exist within definite limits.¹⁵⁰ In other words, it is because we know that we die or might not have been born in the first place that we also know we are not Gods.¹⁵¹ For there are necessary limits that must be ascribed to human existence that by definition cannot apply to an absolutely infinite substance. But if humans are finite modes and God is an infinite substance, then how can the idea of one be a necessary corollary of the other? For, the existence of a human being now seems entirely contingent (if not unnecessary), yet we saw through the *Cogito* that the idea of thought “cannot be conceived except as existing,”¹⁵² and “what cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself.”¹⁵³ So it follows that human beings know themselves to exist according to an identical standard that substance conceives itself to exist (in itself) since both have this idea without the idea of another thing. But, by virtue of the limitations that define them, the idea of finite things requires the concept of other finite things (*ad nauseum*) through which

¹⁴⁹ EID2.

¹⁵⁰ For example, human beings can only exist in a given place and time if the conditions of that place and time do not exclude the conditions necessary to their existence. Just as Spinoza argues in EIP11.dem. that a “triangle necessarily exists now or that it is impossible for it exist now,” the same applies to human beings, or any other finite thing, who cannot exist except within certain conditions. That is, humans cannot exist in a given place if at that time it is too hot, cold, dry, wet, etc.

¹⁵¹ “The essence of man does not involve necessary existence, that is, from the order of Nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist.” EIIA1. For, “the being of substance involves necessary existence. Therefore, if the being of substance pertained to the essence of man, then substance being given, man would necessarily be given, and consequently man would exist necessarily, which is absurd.” EIIP10dem.

¹⁵² EID1.

¹⁵³ EIA2.

their idea is formed.¹⁵⁴ And so, human beings also know themselves to be modified things (in another) subject to external determinations by an infinity of other modified things. But how can a human being be both in itself *and* in another? Is this not a contradiction that attributes opposite properties to the same thing at the same time? Thus, how does Spinoza account for the simultaneous unity of a thing that exists in itself, insofar as it has an absolute idea of itself, and in another, insofar as it is determined by an infinity of things outside of itself?

Let us begin with Spinoza's a priori argument for the necessary existence of God both because this is how the *Ethics* begins but also because God, for Spinoza, constitutes the absolute limit and condition of existence in which we can then situate the paradox of the human being.¹⁵⁵ In EIP11, Spinoza argues that "God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists."¹⁵⁶ The first demonstration for this follows an a priori line of reasoning that begins by reminding the reader that EIA7 posits that "if a thing can be conceived as not existing its essence does not involve existence."¹⁵⁷ So, to deny EIP11 it would have to be proposed that God's essence did not necessarily involve existence. But Spinoza's ontology holds that whatever exists, exists *necessarily*. Hence, if something *does not* exist it is because it *cannot* exist, and so there must be a cause or a set of causes that prevents its existence:

¹⁵⁴ For example, the idea of a tree requires the idea of vegetation, which requires the idea of photosynthesis, which requires the idea of light and energy, which requires the ideas of biophysics, and so on *ad infinitum*. This regress of presupposition can be applied to any finite existing thing.

¹⁵⁵ "Except for God, there neither is, nor can be conceived any substance, that is, thing that is in itself and is conceived through itself. But modes can neither be nor be conceived without substance. So they can be in the divine nature alone, and can be conceived through it alone. But except for substances and modes there is nothing. Therefore, everything is in God and nothing can be or be conceived without God." EIP15dem.

¹⁵⁶ EIP11.

¹⁵⁷ EIA7.

For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason *or* cause why it exists but if it does not exist, there must also be a reason *or* cause which prevents it from existing, *or* which takes its existence away. But this reason, *or* cause, must either be contained in the very nature of the thing, or be outside it. For example, the very nature of a square circle indicates the reason why it does not exist, namely, *because it involves a contradiction*. On the other hand, the reason why a substance exists also follows from its nature alone, because it involves existence. But the reason why a circle or triangle exists, or why it does not exist, does not follow from the nature of these things, but from the order of the whole of corporeal Nature. For from this order it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now or that it is impossible for it to exist now. These things are evident through themselves; from them it follows that a thing necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents it from existing. Therefore, if there can be no reason or cause which prevents God from existing, or which takes his existence away, it must certainly be inferred that he necessarily exists.¹⁵⁸

Thus, if a limitation could be conceived to preclude the existence of an absolutely infinite whole “it would have to be either in God’s very nature or outside it, that is, in another substance of another nature.”¹⁵⁹ But “two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another”¹⁶⁰ and so would also have no way to cause the existence or non-existence of the

¹⁵⁸ EIP11.dem.alt. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ EIP2.

other.¹⁶¹ Thus, there is no external cause or reason that could prevent or dissolve the existence of an absolutely infinite God or substance, except God or substance itself. But it is absurd to propose that God could prevent the existence of God because this installs a contradiction within a single term or idea and even Aristotle affirms that a contradiction requires the relation of at least two distinct terms.¹⁶² In Spinoza's language, however, this is absurd because contradiction is a negation, negation is a limitation, and limitation applies only to the finite. "Since being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature,"¹⁶³ it necessarily pertains to the nature or essence of God to exist because there is nothing external from which its existence could be negated and contradicted.¹⁶⁴

This a priori argument for the necessary existence of God clearly depends on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic determinations. That is, its logic clearly depends on the first axiom of the *Ethics* that posits "whatever is, is either in itself or in another" since the necessary existence of God is predicated on the impossibility of there being any external causes in relation to the absolute whole of existence (God) that could destroy it. Therefore, if there is nothing extrinsic to God that could either cause God to exist or be destroyed, then existence must

¹⁶¹ "If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other." EIP3. This is because "if they have nothing in common with one another, then they cannot be understood through one another, and so one cannot be the cause of the other." EIP3dem.

¹⁶² "For truth and falsity imply combination and separation. Nouns and verbs, provided, nothing is added, are like thoughts without combination or separation; 'man' and 'white', as isolated terms, are not yet either true or false." Aristotle, "On Interpretation," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (1941; reis. New York: Random House, Modern Library Editions, 2001) 16a, 40.

¹⁶³ EIP8schol.

¹⁶⁴ "Things are of a contrary nature, that is, cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other." EIIIP5. This is because "if they could agree with one another, or be in the same subject at once, then there could be something in the same subject which could destroy it, which is absurd." EIIIP5dem. For example, it is absurd to suppose that something cyclical can contradict the nature of a circle.

necessarily pertain to its immanent and intrinsic nature considered in itself.¹⁶⁵ But what does the first axiom of the *Ethics* depend on? How can Spinoza, a finite human being and therefore a mere part of an absolute whole, have the idea of an absolute whole of existence? How does Spinoza know that “whatever is, is either in itself or in another?”¹⁶⁶

Spinoza also offers an a posteriori demonstration for the same proposition, and it implies that EIA1 is known from the ontological equivalence between existence and power. Its premise is that “to be able to not exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power.”¹⁶⁷ Spinoza thinks this proposition is self-evident because if something does not exist, then it has no properties, and if a thing has no properties, then it can neither affect nor be affected. If a thing cannot affect or be affected by anything then it also cannot exist, therefore “nothing has no properties.”¹⁶⁸ But “we feel that a certain body, our body, is affected in many ways,”¹⁶⁹ and therefore the givenness or mere fact of our existence is self-evident.¹⁷⁰ A square circle, for example, cannot exist because its contradictory properties cancel-out the effects that would follow from the essence or definition of its properties. For, “the power of an effect is defined by the power of its cause, insofar as its essence is explained or defined by the essence of the cause.”¹⁷¹ But if the power of a cause is self-destructive or “if two contrary actions are

¹⁶⁵ “A substance cannot be produced by anything else; therefore it will be the cause of itself, that is, its essence necessarily involves existence, *or* it pertains to its nature to exist.” EIP7dem.

¹⁶⁶ EIA1.

¹⁶⁷ EIP11dem.alt.

¹⁶⁸ PDPIIA1

¹⁶⁹ EIIA4.

¹⁷⁰ The nature, essence, and power, however, of our existence is not itself self-evident. For although we know that we exist insofar as we are certain that our body is affected in many ways, it has yet to be shown whether the condition of our existence is in ourselves or in another.

¹⁷¹ EVA2.

aroused in the same subject, a change will have to occur, either in both of them, or in one only, until they cease to be contrary.”¹⁷²

The force of Spinoza’s a posteriori argument for the necessary existence of God derives from the absurdity of conceiving essence (definition) and power (actions of which a defined thing is capable) in separation. Being and doing, existing and affecting, are, in Spinoza’s ontology, identical terms because “the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.”¹⁷³ In other words, the powers that preserve and persevere an existing thing are identical with the essence of the thing itself. But how does the ontological equivalence between essence and power prove the existence of God? The proof for this idea is in the necessary entailment that its certainty involves. For, “if what now necessarily exists are only finite beings, then finite beings are more powerful than an absolutely infinite Being. But this, as is known through itself, is absurd. So, either nothing exists or an absolutely infinite Being also exists. But we exist, either in ourselves, or in something else, which necessarily exists. Therefore . . . God necessarily exists.”¹⁷⁴ So, Spinoza knows that “whatever is, is either in itself or in another”¹⁷⁵ precisely because he knows that a partial, modified thing such as himself exists, and if he exists then God must exist because the idea of a part necessarily entails the idea of a whole.

Spinoza’s logic here is strikingly similar to the logic of necessary entailment that Descartes proposes in the fifth meditation. In response to a possible objection to his argument

¹⁷² EVA1.

¹⁷³ EIIIP7.

¹⁷⁴ EIP11dem.alt.

¹⁷⁵ EIA1.

that “God cannot be conceived without existing anymore than a mountain without a valley,” Descartes recognizes that “still from the fact that I conceive of a mountain with a valley, it does not follow that there is such a mountain in the world.” But Descartes insists that this objection is misleading:

While from the fact that I cannot conceive God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from Him, and hence that He really exists; not that my thought can bring this to pass, or impose any necessity on things, but, on the contrary, because the necessity which lies in the thing itself, i.e. the necessity of the existence of God determines me to think in this way. For it is not within my power to think of God without existence (that is of a supremely perfect Being devoid of a supreme perfection) though it is in my power to imagine a horse either with wings or without wings.¹⁷⁶

Hence, Descartes argues that God cannot be conceived without existing in the same way that a mountain cannot be conceived without a valley. Likewise, Spinoza argues that God cannot be conceived without existing for the same reason that a triangle cannot be conceived without a shape whose three angles are equal to two right angles.¹⁷⁷ Both claim to know the necessary existence of God according to a logic of necessary entailment.

Spinoza posits a logic of necessary entailment between the essence and power of a human being and the essence and power of God such that one cannot exist apart from, without, or outside the definition of the other. The necessity of this entailment is based on the intuition that since we know certainly that we exist, and that we are not Gods, then the certainty with which

¹⁷⁶ Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation V, 82-83.

¹⁷⁷ EIP17schol1.

we know ourselves to exist must be connected to the idea of God who also necessarily exists. So what distinguishes this necessity from the fictional fabrications of teleological and anthropocentric appetite that Spinoza criticizes in the appendix to part one of the *Ethics*? How does Spinoza know that this necessary entailment is not an arbitrary and fictional act of his mind? That is, how can we be sure that the ideas we have and the connections they entail adequately correspond to a reality considered in itself? To answer this we must examine Spinoza's theory of adequate and inadequate ideas.

Spinoza's epistemology follows the logic of intrinsic and extrinsic determination that has already been established. "By adequate idea I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, *or* intrinsic determinations of a true idea. Exp.: *I say intrinsic to exclude what is extrinsic, namely, the agreement of the idea with its object.*"¹⁷⁸ So adequate ideas are ideas that follow from the intrinsic determinations of human nature considered in itself, they are ideas that account for the causes of their own production. Thus, all adequate ideas involve a kernel of truth even if that truth can always be developed further, while not all "true" ideas are adequate. The very term *adequate* signals an equivalence between an idea and the causes that determine it such that they constitute a singular whole.¹⁷⁹ Hence, an adequate idea is a thought that considers its intrinsic power to affect and be affected.¹⁸⁰ But if thinking is an intrinsic power of intellection, then what

¹⁷⁸ EIID4.

¹⁷⁹ The etymology of the English word *adequate* comes from the Latin word *adaequare* meaning "to make equal."

¹⁸⁰ "The idea of any mode in which the human body is affected by external bodies must involve the nature of the human body and at the same time the nature of the external body." EIIP16.

determines a mind to think? In other words, if Spinoza insists that “a true idea must agree with its object,” then what is the object of a true idea?¹⁸¹

Spinoza answers this question in EIA3 and EIA4. EIA3 posits that where a determinate cause is given, an effect necessarily follows, and that “conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.”¹⁸² Next, EIA4 posits that “the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.”¹⁸³ Given these two axioms it follows that “the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else.”¹⁸⁴ For, if the object of the mind were not the body, then we would not have ideas regarding the affections of our body. But since we *do* have ideas regarding the affections of our body, it follows that the object of the mind is the body, and it actually exists. If the object of the mind were both the body as well as some other thing, “then since nothing exists from which there does not follow some effect, there would necessarily be an idea in our mind of some effect of it. But there is no idea of it. Therefore, the object of our mind is the existing body and nothing else.”¹⁸⁵ Spinoza therefore concludes “that man consists of a mind and a body, and that the human body exists, as we are aware of it.”¹⁸⁶ Yet, even though we know that we think, and the first things that we think about concern the affections of our body,

¹⁸¹ EIA6.

¹⁸² EIA3.

¹⁸³ EIA4.

¹⁸⁴ EIIP13.

¹⁸⁵ EIIP13dem.

¹⁸⁶ EIIP13cor.

Spinoza insists that we neither have adequate knowledge of ourselves nor external bodies so long as our ideas are tied only to the affections of the body.

Spinoza argues that “the human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected,”¹⁸⁷ because the mind is not the body itself but rather the *idea* or *knowledge* of the body. This is important because we simply do not have a *perfect* knowledge of the human body, and, according to Spinoza’s standard, we never will. For, Spinoza’s theory of extended substance requires that “its parts must so concur that there is no vacuum” and that, therefore, the “parts” of corporeal substance cannot be really divided and distinguished from the others. Thus, we cannot have a perfect and exhaustive knowledge of the human body because this would require a perfect knowledge of all existing bodies since they cannot be separated. In this way, Spinoza argues that the human body has God for a cause not insofar as God is considered absolutely, but insofar as God is considered finitely according to an infinite regression of finite causes.¹⁸⁸ So the adequate or perfect idea of the human body is in God, or the absolute whole of existence, but only “insofar as he is affected by a great many other ideas, and not insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind.”¹⁸⁹ So the mind does not involve adequate knowledge of itself so long as it attends only to the ideas of the body’s affections because the causes of these affections extend too far into the ontological horizon for the mind to perceive perfectly, that is, *adequately*.¹⁹⁰ Thus, ideas

¹⁸⁷ EIIP19.

¹⁸⁸ “The idea of a singular thing which actually exists has God for a cause not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing which actually exists; and of this idea God is also the cause, insofar as he is affected by another third idea, and so on, to infinity.” EIIP9.

¹⁸⁹ EIIP19dem.

¹⁹⁰ “For the parts of the human body are highly composite individuals, whose parts can be separated from the human body and communicate their motions to other bodies in another manner, while the human body completely preserves its nature and form. And so the idea, or knowledge, of each part will be in God, insofar as he is considered to be

that are related only to the body remain inadequate because they are unable to distinguish between what the human body contributes to an affection and what external bodies contribute to it. As a result, the idea of the affection is inadequate or confusedly intertwined with other causes. But neither are the ideas of the body's affections adequate insofar as they are related only to the mind,¹⁹¹ for in that case the ideas are mere properties without an object and so "are like conclusions without premises."¹⁹² What, for example, is the idea of whiteness beyond the idea of a white body?¹⁹³ It is, of course, nothing but a property without an object. What adequate ideas require, however, is the necessity according to which an object and property necessarily entail each other. Hence:

the mind does not know itself except insofar as it perceives ideas of the affections of the body. But it does not perceive its own body except through the very ideas themselves of the affections of the body, and it is also through them alone that it perceives external bodies. And so, insofar as it has these ideas, then neither of itself, nor of its own body, nor of external bodies does it have an adequate knowledge, but only a mutilated and confused knowledge.¹⁹⁴

affected by another idea of a singular thing, a singular thing which is prior, in the order of Nature, to the part itself. The same must also be said of each part of the individual composing the human body. And so, the knowledge of each part composing the human body is in God insofar as he is affected with a great many ideas of things, and not insofar as he has only the idea of the human body, that is, the idea which constitutes the nature of the human mind. And so the human mind does not involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body." EIIP24dem.

¹⁹¹ "The ideas of the affections of the human body, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused." EIIP28.

¹⁹² EIIP28dem.

¹⁹³ Paraphrased from MT.VI, I/247.

¹⁹⁴ EIIP29cor.

So, are adequate ideas simply too high of an epistemological standard for human beings to live up to? However ardently skeptics and dogmatists alike might affirm this notion, Spinoza insists that “there is nothing positive in ideas on account of which they are called false.”¹⁹⁵ For, if there were a positive standard intrinsic to false ideas on account of which their falseness was known, then this standard would have to be either in God or outside God. But “all ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true,”¹⁹⁶ because “all ideas which are in God,” that is, substance or the Absolute whole of existence, “agree entirely with their objects.”¹⁹⁷ And yet, “it also can neither be nor be conceived outside God. And so there can be nothing positive in ideas on account of which they are called false.”¹⁹⁸ It is therefore necessary that “falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, or mutilated and confused, ideas involve.”¹⁹⁹ Hence, “there is nothing positive in ideas which constitutes the form of falsity; but falsity cannot consist in an absolute privation (for it is minds, not bodies, which are said to err, or be deceived), nor also in absolute ignorance. For to be ignorant and to err are different.”²⁰⁰

Spinoza does not say exactly how ignorance and error are different, but it is clear from his reasoning that falsity cannot consist in an absolute privation of knowledge because if this were the case then we would have no true ideas from which to recognize it. For this reason, there must be an objective standard intrinsic to thought itself in relation to which ideas are known to be either true or false since the true idea of the false cannot follow from false ideas. Thus, if

¹⁹⁵ EIIIP33.

¹⁹⁶ EIIIP32.

¹⁹⁷ EIIIP32dem.

¹⁹⁸ EIIIP33dem.

¹⁹⁹ EIIIP35.

²⁰⁰ EIIIP35dem.

falsity cannot consist in an absolute privation of knowledge, then there must always already be some kernel of truth immanent to both bodies and minds from which confused ideas can be identified and untangled. Spinoza hints at this immanent standard of truth when he states that “it is minds, not bodies, which are said to err, or be deceived.”²⁰¹ But what does he mean when he writes this? Does Spinoza not consider the senses to be inherently dubious?

Spinoza argues that bodies do not err in communicating their motions because “all bodies either move or are at rest,”²⁰² and are thereby distinguished from the others by virtue of the relative degrees of speed and slowness that pertain to the organization of their parts.²⁰³ Therefore, since degrees of speed and rest universally pertain to all bodies, and since “those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately,”²⁰⁴ the communications between bodies cannot be conceived to err. For example:

When we look at the sun, we imagine it as about two hundred feet away from us, an error which does not consist simply in this imagining, but in the fact that while we imagine it in this way, we are ignorant of its true distance and of the cause of this imagining. For even if we later come to know that it is more than six hundred diameters of the earth away from us, we nevertheless imagine it as near. For we imagine the sun so near not

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² EIIA1' Physical Digression.

²⁰³ “The individual so composed retains its nature, whether it, as a whole, moves or is at rest, or whether it moves in this or that direction, so long as each part retains its motion, and communicates it, as before, to the others.” EIIL7.

²⁰⁴ EIIP38.

because we do not know its true distance, but because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by the sun.²⁰⁵

Thus, our eyes do not err in perceiving the sun to be near since the image we have of it follows from the powers of the human eye together with the actual distance of the sun. It is true therefore that human eyes perceive the distance of the sun in such a way, even if this image does not involve the actual distance between the sun and the earth. It is the same, for example, when a pencil is placed in a glass of water that distorts our perception of the pencil in the glass so that it appears fractured. It is true that light has refracted off the water, and it is true that our eyes perceive this refraction, but our mind will only take this to be the true state of the pencil if the mind does not already have an idea that excludes the possibility of an actually fractured pencil. That is, a mind will think the pencil is fractured either because the mind lacks or is deprived of an idea of refraction, or because it has never experienced the image before and has no memory from which to inductively arrive at the pencil's integrity. Spinoza's conclusion, therefore, is that bodies do not err. Hence, we are not deceived simply because we have a body, we are deceived only if we confuse the causes affecting the body with the causes affecting the mind.

The fact that our imaginary perceptions of the world do not change even after we have true ideas that negate their representational content demonstrates Spinoza's argument that it is minds that err (but which are not ignorant) and not bodies. Otherwise the perception of the fractured pencil or the size of the sun would "correct" itself upon encountering the truth, but since that does not happen, it is clear that our perceptions and our ideas of those perceptions do

²⁰⁵ EIIP35schol.

not have the same causes.²⁰⁶ According to Spinoza's ontology, ideas are caused by other ideas,²⁰⁷ and the motions of bodies are caused by other moving bodies.²⁰⁸ Therefore, "there are no modes of thinking, such as love, desire, or whatever is designated by the word affects of the mind, unless there is in the same individual the idea of the thing loved, desired, and the like. But there can be an idea, even though there is no other mode of thinking."²⁰⁹ In other words, there are no ideas of beauty unless there are ideas of beautiful objects, but there can be an idea even without an extrinsic object because "the mind is united to itself in the same way as the mind is united to the body."²¹⁰ That is, the mind is not only the idea (subject) of the body insofar as the body is the object of the mind, the mind can take itself as its own object and subject as *the idea of the idea*.²¹¹ For "we have shown that the mind is united to the body from the fact that the body is the object of the mind; and so by the same reasoning the idea of the mind must be united with its own object, that is, with the mind itself, in the same way as the mind is united with the body."²¹²

²⁰⁶ "For each attribute is conceived through itself without any other. So the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one; and so 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." EIP6dem.

²⁰⁷ "When I said that God is the cause of the idea, say of a circle, only insofar as he is a thinking thing, and the cause of the circle only insofar as he is an extended thing, this was for no other reason than because the formal being of the idea of the circle can be perceived only through another mode of thinking, as its proximate cause, and that mode again through another, and soon, to infinity. Hence, so long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of Nature, or the connection of causes, through the attribute of thought alone. And insofar as they are considered as modes of extension, the order of the whole of Nature must be explained through the attribute of extension alone." EIP7schol.

²⁰⁸ "A body which moves or is at rest must be determined to motion or rest by another body, which has also been determined to motion or rest by another, and that again by another, and so on, to infinity." EII3.

²⁰⁹ EIIA1.

²¹⁰ EIP21.

²¹¹ "So the idea of the mind and the mind itself are one and the same thing, which is conceived under one and the same attribute, namely, thought. The idea of the mind, I say, and the mind itself follow in God from the same power of thinking and by the same necessity. For the idea of the mind, that is, the idea of the idea, is nothing but the form of the idea insofar as this is considered as a mode of thinking without relation to the object." EIP21schol.

²¹² EIP21dem.

The human mind therefore exists *in itself* because it can take itself for its own object and therefore has absolute ideas from which it can interrogate and evaluate its contingent ideas. But the mind also exists *in another* because it is the idea of the body as it actually exists in connection to an infinite plurality of other bodies.

This is precisely what constitutes the absolute and immanent standard of human certainty in Spinoza's epistemology. The human mind can be conceived to exist in itself in such a way that its actions follow from its own nature.²¹³ Hence, "as soon as someone knows something, [she] thereby knows that [she] knows it, and at the same time knows that [she] knows that [she] knows, and so on, to infinity."²¹⁴ So, if we should ask "how a person can know that he has an idea which agrees with its object," Spinoza would reply "I have just shown, more than sufficiently, that this arises solely from his having an idea which does agree with its object – *or, that truth is its own standard.*"²¹⁵ Otherwise, "who can know that he understands some thing unless he first understands it? That is, who can know that he is certain about some thing unless he is first certain about it? What can there be which is clearer and more certain than a true idea, to serve as a standard of truth? As the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false."²¹⁶ It is therefore precisely because "man thinks or, to put it differently, we know that we think,"²¹⁷ and "we feel that a certain body, our body, is

²¹³ "I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is, when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause." EIIID2.

²¹⁴ EIIP21schol.

²¹⁵ EIIP43schol. Emphasis added.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ EIIA2.

affected in many ways”²¹⁸ that human beings have an absolute and immanent standard of knowledge. Thus, the standard of the true ideas that we have is not an external object or authority whose mysterious causes extend outward to an infinity that we cannot perceive. Paradoxically, it is precisely the very thing that we ourselves are – both insofar as that thing stands in relation to an infinite conglomerate of other bodies that exist *causa-alio* and insofar as that thing stands in relation to itself *causa-sui*.

This then is Spinoza’s paradox of immanence: we must simultaneously attribute seemingly opposed properties to the same subject (a human being) at the same time if we are to know either ourselves or external objects with absolute certainty. So, we should “not to try to reject these things as false because of the Paradoxes that occur here and there; [we] should first deign to consider the order in which we prove them, and then [we] will become certain that we have reached the truth.”²¹⁹ Even though this simultaneous unity of opposites would be inconceivable according to the rule of non-contradiction, it is nonetheless certain. For Spinoza, the mind must be conceived to have its determining ground in another since, being the idea of the body, the causes of the body’s affections are inextricable from the infinite complexes of other natural bodies. But the mind must also be conceived to have its determining ground in itself since, being the idea of the idea, the mind has adequate ideas of the body’s affections from which errors (and vice) can be interrogated. The paradox is that for the mind to know that it exists in-another it must also have an adequate idea that exists in-itself.

²¹⁸ EIIA4.

²¹⁹ TEI.46.

In conclusion, the first and foundational axiom of the *Ethics* that posits “whatever is, is either in itself or in another”²²⁰ is not known either deductively or inductively. On the contrary, since this axiom involves “an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God [as they relate] to the adequate knowledge of the formal essence of things,” it is known according to what Spinoza describes as “*intuitive knowledge*.”²²¹ The axiom clearly describes human beings as finite modes that exist in and are caused by another since no human being has ever given birth to themselves, nor required nothing outside of themselves to endure in existence. But, even so, to be in-another is still in some sense to be in God since “nothing can be or be conceived without God.”²²² Therefore, it is necessarily the case that although human beings are finite modes, it pertains to our nature to understand the difference between what is in-itself (substance) and what is in-another (mode). For, if we did not intuitively understand this then we would never know ourselves as finite modes in the first place. And this is why Spinoza argues that a knowledge of God is absolutely universal to the nature of human beings. That is, human beings “could neither be nor be conceived if [they] did not have the power to enjoy this greatest good. For it pertains to the essence of the human mind to have an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence.”²²³ It pertains to the essence of the human mind to have an adequate knowledge of God because the human mind necessarily has ideas from which it perfectly knows its own finitude and imperfection. And since there are no mountains without valleys, or triangles whose sides are

²²⁰ EIA1.

²²¹ EIP40schol.II.

²²² EIP15.

²²³ EIVP36schol.

not equal to two right angles, the perfect idea of the partial necessarily entails the perfect idea of the whole.

The paradox of immanence reveals the absolute end or purpose of human existence, but it is not in the way that teleology separates an end from its beginning. It is an end or “effect” that is always already unified with its beginning, condition, and cause. The simultaneity of this relation brings with it a dynamics of transition that constitutes the collective project of human freedom itself insofar as that freedom aspires to, for, and from, the freedom of God.²²⁴ For, “if two contrary actions are aroused in the same subject, a change will have to occur, either in both of them, or in one only, until they cease to be contrary.”²²⁵ And since two contrary properties are attributed to the human being who is at once in itself and in another, change will need to occur until they cease to be contrary. The dynamics of this change are precisely what, for Spinoza, constitute the distinctly human project of freedom in which our singular essence transitions to an ever greater or lesser perfection of its nature.²²⁶ And since “in each human mind some ideas are adequate, but others are mutilated and confused,”²²⁷ the seeds of freedom are universally immanent to the nature of the mind itself. The fruition of this seed, however, is never guaranteed since individuals transition to ever greater *or* lesser perfection of their nature depending on the relations of which they are a part. For, the human mind exists predominantly in a state of bondage “so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard

²²⁴ “God acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one.” EIP17. In other words, “God alone is a free cause.” EIP17cor.II.

²²⁵ EVA1.

²²⁶ “When I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect. Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished.” EIV preface.

²²⁷ EIIIP1dem.

this or that.”²²⁸ But, at the same time, the mind can exist in a state of freedom “so long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions.”²²⁹ Thus, the paradox of immanence demonstrates that although being in another is contrary to being in itself, the two are not exclusionary opposites. Rather, the power to know the transitive determinations of our nature expresses the immanent power, virtue, and blessedness of a freedom that is distinctly human.

With this I have finished all the things I wished to show concerning the mind’s power over the affects and its freedom. From what has been shown, it is clear how much the wise man is capable of, and how much more powerful he is than one who is ignorant and is driven only by lust. For not only is the ignorant man troubled in many ways by external causes, and unable ever to possess true peace of mind, but he also lives as if he knew neither himself, nor God, nor things; and as soon as he ceases to be acted on, he ceases to be. On the other hand, the wise man, insofar as he is considered as such, is hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind.²³⁰

²²⁸ EIIP29schol.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ EVP42schol.

Chapter Three

The Pluralism of Religious Monism

In this chapter I argue that the intuited idea of God that Spinoza presents in the *Ethics* is fundamentally consistent with the concept of biblical revelation presented in the TPT. In both the *Ethics* and the TPT Spinoza demonstrates from the paradoxical logic of the ontological argument that certainty must be conceived as its own standard, regardless of whether that certainty is of a moral or mathematical/geometrical nature. Therefore, contrary to relation proposed by some scholars, I argue that the separation that Spinoza posits between philosophy and theology in the TPT cannot be understood as a hierarchy,²³¹ or as a secret code designed to escape the censorship of religious authorities.²³² Although Spinoza writes that he is “fully persuaded that Scripture leaves reason absolutely free, and that it has nothing in common with Philosophy, but that each rests on its own foundation,”²³³ what he actually demonstrates is that both religion and philosophy share an identical foundation in the paradox of the ontological argument. Spinoza writes that “Scripture leaves reason absolutely free” and that theology has “nothing to do with Philosophy” for the exact same reason. The contents of both reason and faith are universally immanent to the nature of the mind and therefore cannot be deduced (philosophically) or induced (dogmatically) from any external power. What counts for Spinoza as a knowledge of or faith in God “is not some certain number of books, but a simple concept of the divine mind revealed to the prophets: to obey God wholeheartedly, by practicing justice and loving-kindness.”²³⁴ Thus,

²³¹ James, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together*.

²³² Tosel, “Superstition and Reading,” in *The New Spinoza*.

²³³ TPT preface.24.

²³⁴ TPT preface.26.

on the one hand, a true knowledge of or faith in God cannot precede the individual knower or believer. But, on the other hand, that individual's knowledge or faith cannot exist in a vacuum because it cannot be separated from the works and practices that it involves. That is, "because [people] vary greatly in their mentality . . . because what moves one person to religion moves another to laughter . . . each person must be allowed freedom of judgement and the power to interpret the foundations of faith according to [their] own mentality. We must judge the piety of each person's faith from [their] works alone."²³⁵ Ultimately, these reasons are exactly the same because they both refer to the paradoxical immanence in which Spinoza's ideas of God, the thinking mind, and external things (including other people) are conceived and related. I will show that faith and philosophy "each rest on its own foundation" and have "nothing in common" only insofar as that common foundation would allow for one to be reduced to the "ancillary of the other."²³⁶ Both philosophy and theology share the common foundation of an intuited idea rooted in immanence such that each necessarily leaves the other "absolutely free."²³⁷

In the previous chapter I showed that the ontological argument for the necessary existence of God in the *Ethics* constitutes a paradox of singularity because it is in light of this idea that human beings know themselves to be at once determined and free, modified and substantial. As long as the mind is capable of honing adequate ideas regarding the affections of the body, the human mind can freely appropriate those affections in ways that follow from its nature alone. This is why Spinoza consistently emphasises the arbitrary and contingent way in which human beings are born into bondage but then begin again freely in the self-conscious

²³⁵ TPT preface.28.

²³⁶ TPT preface.27.

²³⁷ TPT preface.24.

relation to that arbitrary and contingent beginning. In this chapter I show how this structure is reflected in the TPT as it abruptly begins with the idea of prophecy and miracles but begins again in a self-conscious relation to itself through the striving works of faith. The paradox of singularity thus begins with the paradox of beginning freely (*causa-sui*) in relation to what has always already begun (*causa-alio*).

In the first section of this chapter, I show how the intuited idea of God that Spinoza presented in the *Ethics* relates to the idea of biblical prophecy presented in the TPT. In the second section, I show that the knowledge of God is not a privilege exclusive to either philosophy or religious faith but is paradoxically constitutive of both at once, and that this paradox can be seen most clearly in Spinoza's theory of interpretation. The third and final section of this chapter, "Monism=Pluralism," concludes that Spinoza's philosophical and theological notions are consistent. The equally adequate truth they share – namely, the intuition of an idea which is its own standard – is inconceivable outside of its pluralistic expressions. Insofar as philosophy and religion can distinguish between what is partially human (mode) and what is wholly divine (substance), their self-interpreting and self-correcting practices evidence the identity of their content.

a. Superstition and the Immanence of Revelation

The *Ethics* begins with an all-encompassing idea of God as an absolutely infinite substance that contains and determines all individual things, but it begins again with the understanding that there can be no knowledge of determination that is not itself in some way substantial. This paradoxically redoubled "beginning" is why the idea of human freedom that Spinoza presents in the *Ethics* cannot be described as an escape from natural determination.

Instead, Spinoza's idea of freedom should be understood as a striving to maximize the power from which singular things increasingly act from their innate nature. For human beings, the expression of this power involves the effort to transition away from our bondage to the final-ends of teleological appetites, and to transition towards an ever greater self-conscious "freedom of mind, or blessedness."²³⁸ I will show here that Spinoza's concept of true revelation in the TPT is completely consistent with the knowledge of God that he presents in the *Ethics*. I do this by interpreting the religious status of prophets, prophecy, and miracles according to Spinoza's immanent idea of revelation. Spinoza's concept of revelation and his ontological argument both presuppose an equally immanent standard from which human beings strive to transition (exodus) from superstition and towards a love of God. Again, exactly as in the *Ethics*, we shall see that this exodus involves our liberation from the superstitious and inadequate ideas of teleology through the paradoxical affirmation of a finite being that has a certain knowledge of God. Although we have always already begun in bondage and subjugation to a power that precedes us – be it Pharaoh, Caesar, or any other totalizing effort to subdue singularity – Spinoza shows that we could not possibly know this bondage and subjugation were it not for the power of a true idea that we necessarily possess and were compelled to hone and perfect.

The story of Exodus is, of course, one of the better-known stories of the Bible and so provides a good example with which to begin. The story narrates the miraculous events of the Hebrew emancipation from Egyptian bondage under the prophetic rule of Moses. Readers will find in it fantastical and supernatural images of God punishing the wicked Egyptians with plagues, rescuing the Hebrews by splitting the Red Sea, an inexhaustibly burning bush, and other supernatural events that seem to narrate a divine intervention that suspends the causal laws of

²³⁸ EV preface.

nature for the exclusive benefit of relatively few. Thus, we can find in Exodus, as in any book of Scripture, the typical signs of teleology in which human beings explain the conditions of their existence through the projection of their affects onto nature as final-causes of a divine will. But if foundational biblical narratives like Exodus express the teleological thinking that we saw criticized in the *Ethics*, how can they possibly serve to express an identical ontological content when the *Ethics* seeks to fundamentally deconstruct these sorts of inadequacies? The answer depends on the way we interpret the sacredness of prophets, prophecy, miracles, and faith itself. So, how does Spinoza distinguish these ideas from their superstitious and teleological counterparts?

Spinoza opens chapter one of the TPT with a problematic relation between the ideas of prophecy and natural knowledge, so we must be prepared to modify this initial relation in light of later developments. The problem is that it seems that the idea of prophecy refers to something exceptionally rare and mystical and which is gifted to an exceptional few who are like privileged *interpreters* or *spokespersons* for those who cannot interpret or speak for themselves.

Prophecy, *or* Revelation, is the *certain* knowledge of some matter which God has revealed to [humans]. And a Prophet is one who interprets God's revelations to those who cannot have *certain* knowledge of them, and who therefore can only embrace what has been revealed by simple faith. For among the Hebrews a Prophet is called נָבִיִּים *nabi*, that is, spokesman and interpreter.²³⁹

But this definition should give us pause. Who are these people that cannot have certain knowledge of God's revelation? We saw in the previous chapter that Spinoza argues in the

²³⁹ TPT1.1. Emphasis added.

Ethics that human nature is itself the cause of the idea of God and that God is the cause of human nature. So, how could even a single human being possibly lack this knowledge if it is intuited from the very essence of their being? But since we do not yet know what Spinoza means by revelation, we should return to this question later. For now, what matters is the relation between natural and divine knowledge because this will determine who can know what.

Spinoza notes that, in a way, a knowledge of natural things meets the above definition of prophecy. For, if God is the cause of both natural things and their ideas, then a true idea of natural things would be a revelation from God since “what we know by the natural light depends only on the knowledge of God and of [God’s] eternal decrees.”²⁴⁰ Even though natural knowledge is “common to all,” Spinoza thinks that most people do not consider it divine but instead view divinity as something exceptionally “rare” and “foreign to their nature.” For this reason, people tend to disregard what is common to their nature and “spurn their natural gifts.”²⁴¹ From this observation, Spinoza suggests that the kind of knowledge that most people call divine differs from what he understands as a knowledge of natural things “in only two respects” but which are clearly interconnected. “The knowledge people call divine extends beyond the limits of natural knowledge, and the laws of human Nature, considered in themselves, cannot be the cause of the knowledge people call divine.”²⁴² This is not Spinoza’s view, it is what he thinks most people believe. If most people believed that the divine is defined by what is exceptionally rare and foreign (extrinsic) to their nature, then it follows that the divine would be thought of as

²⁴⁰ TPT1.2.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² TPT1.3.

something so cryptic that it requires a supernatural insight to perceive and interpret. Spinoza himself thinks that...

... natural knowledge is in no way inferior to prophetic knowledge in the certainty it involves, or in the source from which it is derived, viz. God – unless, perhaps, someone wants to understand (or rather to dream) that the Prophets had, indeed, a human body, but not a human mind, and thus that their sensations and consciousness were of an entirely different nature than ours are.²⁴³

Given this distinction between what most people believe and what Spinoza himself holds, the next paragraph signals that there was something inadequate about the conventional definition of prophets as spokespersons or special interpreters. Spinoza writes that although there is a sense in which natural knowledge can be considered divine, “nevertheless those who pass it on cannot be called Prophets.”²⁴⁴ Spinoza explains in a footnote that this is because the earlier definition of prophecy involves an exclusivity that the divinity of natural knowledge does not.

For an interpreter of God is one who interprets God’s decrees to others to whom they have not been revealed, and who, in embracing them, rely only on the authority of the prophet. But if the [people] who listened to prophets became prophets, as those who listen to philosophers become philosophers, then the prophet would not be an interpreter of the divine decrees, since his hearers would rely, not on the testimony and authority of the prophet, but on revelation itself, and internal testimony.²⁴⁵

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ TPT1.4.

²⁴⁵ TPT1.4.n4.

Is Spinoza saying that the primary difference between a knowledge of nature and a knowledge of God is that divine knowledge involves a special or “divine” election, whereas a knowledge of nature is simply common to all? Spinoza had declared in the TPT’s preface that his purpose in writing was to demonstrate that faith and philosophical reason each rest on their own foundation and should not be conceived subordinately.²⁴⁶ Has he already proven the contrary in the very first problem of the very first chapter?

It may seem like Spinoza is privileging natural knowledge (philosophy) with an unmediated and universal content that, unlike prophecy, requires no mediating interpreter. But this is not Spinoza’s argument. Spinoza could be said to privilege philosophical reason over religious prophecy only if Spinoza had sanctioned and affirmed the former definition of prophecy with which we began. But it is clear that this definition follows from an inadequate idea of prophecy insofar as it is conceived in-another through the representative role of a spokesperson, and does not have the internal testimony of intuition. Recognizing this inadequacy, Spinoza reconceives the popular idea of revelation from which he began.

Therefore, since our mind – simply from the fact that it contains God’s Nature objectively in itself, and participates in it – has the power to form certain notions which explain the nature of things and teach us how to conduct our lives, we can rightly maintain that the nature of the mind, insofar as it is conceived in this way, is the first cause of divine revelation. For whatever we clearly and distinctly understand, the idea and nature of God dictates to us (as we have just indicated), not indeed in words, but in a

²⁴⁶ TPT preface.24.

far more excellent way, which agrees best with the nature of the mind. Anyone who has tasted the certainty of the intellect must have experienced this in [themselves].²⁴⁷

Positing the universal immanence of revelation, however, brings with it one of the central problematics of the TPT. That is, if revelation is immanent to the nature of the mind, then why does Spinoza consistently argue that its contents cannot be deduced by or conflated with the natural light of reason? If revelation is immanent to the nature of the mind, then why are the logical operations of reason unable to prove it?

According to the ontological structure presented in the *Ethics*, anything that exists necessarily exists in such a way that it is either *causa sui* and so exists in itself, or *causa alio* and so exists in another.²⁴⁸ We should therefore allocate the terms *revelation* and *natural reason* to either side of this ontological relation. Accordingly, therefore, if reason is thought to be externally determined, then revelation would be irreducible to and beyond the reach of natural reason to the extent that reason was defined by inductive or deductive logical entailment. Thus, reason cannot deduce revelation because there is no cause or premise prior to or outside of the idea of God from which the revelation of God's existence could be explained or derived. If, alternatively, revelation is thought to be externally determined such that it is caused not by immanent powers of human nature but by the contingencies of affect and appetite, then this too would be beyond the reach of reason. "For what can we say about things exceeding the limits of our intellect beyond what's been handed down to us, either orally or in writing, from the Prophets themselves?"²⁴⁹ And since, there are no living prophets for Spinoza (or any biblical

²⁴⁷ TPT1.5.

²⁴⁸ EIA1.

²⁴⁹ TPT1.7.

scholar) to interview, “our only option is to expound the sacred books left us by the Prophets.”²⁵⁰ Thus, revelation and the natural light of reason only have an ancillary relationship insofar as reason is reduced to deduction and/or revelation reduced to arbitrary feeling. But this is not the relation with which Spinoza concludes. On the contrary, if we want to interrogate the contents of prophetic texts Spinoza shows us that we have to avoid imposing our own linguistic and intellectual assumptions onto them so that we can let the texts speak for themselves. Otherwise, we will be just like the biblical scholastics who “suggest the fantasies of any uneducated person rather than the findings of an accomplished biblical scholar.”²⁵¹

For an example of this linguistic difficulty, Spinoza notes that the ancient Hebrews did not usually “mention” or “heed” particular causes of this or that action or event. Instead, it was conventional to refer all things to God regardless of how mundane or fantastic.

For example, if they have made money by trade, they say that God has given it to them; if they desire that something should happen, they say that God has so disposed their heart . . . So we must not regard as Prophecy and supernatural knowledge everything Scripture says God has told someone, but only what Scripture explicitly says was Prophecy, *or* revelation, or whose status as prophecy follows from the circumstances of the narration.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Ibid. Although this is not the place to analyze Spinoza’s claim that “we have no remaining prophets,” it is important to note, in light of Spinoza’s adequate definition of prophecy, that if the nature of the mind is the first cause of divine revelation, then every interpreter of the Bible who does so with an adequate idea is, by definition, a contemporary prophet.

²⁵¹ TPT preface.18.

²⁵² TPT1.8.

Hence, if we want to understand and evaluate the revelations of the ancient Israelite prophets, then we cannot take every reference to God in Scripture as an expression of revelation. This is because their cultural vernacular did not refer to God only in cases of special distinction, but quite commonly in matters both special and mundane. But this poses a challenge for an interpreter because, according to Spinoza's argument, divine revelation is irreducible to the particular conditions of its historical transmission since the common nature of the mind is its primary cause and not the exclusive character of a particular people or event. In other words, although Abrahamic revelation is supposed to have "originated" with the ancient Jews, revelation itself is not exclusively Jewish. But, on the other hand, if revelation is *revealed* and not simply *found* or *discovered*, then its idea seems to presuppose an original transmission or communication that establishes the revelatory act. The problem is that *prima facie* these two aspects of revelation seem contrary and opposed. So how does Scripture convey this original revelation?

Spinoza thinks that if we examine the books of Scripture we will invariably find that revelation always occurred through the medium of "words, or in visible forms, or in both words and visible forms."²⁵³ We can therefore determine whether "the words and the visible forms were either true, and outside the imagination of the Prophet who heard or saw them, or else imaginary, occurring because the imagination of the Prophet was so disposed . . ."²⁵⁴ To illustrate the apparent means of revelation, Spinoza considers examples such as the voice of God that prophets like Moses (Exodus 25:22) or Samuel (Samuel 3:21) heard. Revelation is not restricted to voices and words, however, but can also occur in images alone as in 1 Chronicles 21:16, "where God

²⁵³ TPT1.9.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

shows his anger to David through an Angel holding a sword in his hand.”²⁵⁵ In all of these examples, the revelation would have occurred either only in the private imagination of the prophet, or publicly outside their imagination and thus exhibited to others. Otherwise:

I do not find in the Sacred Texts any other means by which God communicated himself to [people]. So, as we have shown above, we must not feign or admit any others. Of course, we clearly understand that God can communicate himself immediately to [humans], for he communicates his essence to our mind without using any corporeal means. Nevertheless, for a [person] to perceive by the mind alone things which aren't contained in the first foundations of our knowledge, and can't be deduced from them, his mind would necessarily have to be more excellent than, and far superior to, the human mind.²⁵⁶

We thus come to the unique figure of Christ to whom “the decisions of God, which lead men to salvation, were revealed immediately – without words or visions.”²⁵⁷ Spinoza argues that this is confirmed by Scripture itself and that nowhere will anyone find in it that God appeared or spoke to Christ, but only that “God was revealed to the Apostles through Christ” himself.²⁵⁸ The prophetic figure of Jesus Christ thus has a special status not because his prophecies display a specially virtuosity of imagination but because of an especially close or unmediated connection to God. But this is not because Spinoza supposes Christ to have had a “more excellent, and far superior” mind to other human beings. On the contrary, it is because his prophecies were so

²⁵⁵ TPT1.19.

²⁵⁶ TPT1.22.

²⁵⁷ TPT1.23.

²⁵⁸ TPT1.24.

closely unified with the “first foundations of our knowledge” that Spinoza considers Christ to have had a human mind united with God: “So, if Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man usually does with a companion (i.e., by means of their two bodies), Christ, indeed, communicated with God mind to mind.”²⁵⁹ Thus, whereas the prophecy of other prophets in some way required “the aid of the imagination,” Christ’s very way of being (*ingenium*) was somehow revelatory in itself. This is significant because it suggests that the communication of revelation is not limited to images and words and that the sacredness of prophetic images and words depends not on the images and words themselves, but on something else entirely.

After briefly considering the means of revelation, Spinoza undertakes an etymological investigation into the Hebrew word for *the Spirit of God*.²⁶⁰ For, if we can understand what the ancient Israelites meant when they refer to the spirit of God then we can infer the qualities that characterize the sacredness of a prophet and their prophecies. Spinoza argues that all of the many contexts in which it is found, like “*the Spirit of God was in the Prophet*,” or “*God infused his Spirit into men*,” the word refers to a “singular virtue, beyond what is ordinary.”²⁶¹ Of course, this is not a notion specific to the Hebrews, “the ancients – not only the Jews, but even the Pagans – used to refer to God absolutely everything in which one [person] surpassed the others.”²⁶² What is, however, specific to its Jewish usage is that:

. . . in Hebrew Spirit [רוח] means both the mind and its judgment, and that for this reason the Law itself, because it made known God’s mind, could also be called God’s Spirit *or*

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ The Hebrew word for spirit is “ruach” רוח and its sense is notoriously ambiguous because its meaning is modified by context. Depending on context, it can mean “breath,” “spirit,” “force,” “spark,” etc.

²⁶¹ TPT1.40.

²⁶² TPT1.30.

mind. That's why the imagination of the Prophets could, with equal right, also be called the mind of God, insofar as God's decrees were revealed through it, and the Prophets could be said to have had the mind of God. And although the mind of God and his eternal judgments are inscribed in our minds also, and consequently, we too perceive the mind of God (if I may speak with Scripture), nevertheless, because natural knowledge is common to all, [people] do not value it so highly, as we have already said.²⁶³

We can see in this passage an extraordinary interplay of Spinoza's theory of prophecy as both adequate and inadequate. On the one hand, the ancient Israelites, just like the "pagans," referred everything that was perceived to be uncommon, rare, and exceptional to the spirit of God. In this sense, a prophet differs from a non-prophet to the extent that the prophet possesses some power that renders them singular, exceptional, and distinct. But since pagan peoples also closely associated the idea of the exceptional to the divine there is nothing exceptional or unique about the word in this sense. According to this standard, Alexander the Great, Augustus (Octavian) Caesar, and Jesus Christ all have an equal right to be called divine to the extent that they were capable of exceptional things. Hence, there must be something else that characterizes the Hebraic idea of the spirit of God that distinguish it from its pagan use.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that Spinoza is not seeking to understand the *causes* of revelation but only its content. We do not need to know here what causes something or someone to be infused with the spirit of God, we want to know only what it means. Spinoza reminds the reader that he does not know by "what laws of nature" revelation was made and that we should not speculate by attempting to "explain the form of a singular thing by some transcendental

²⁶³ TPT1.41.

term” of which we are ignorant.²⁶⁴ There is “no need now for us to know the cause of Prophetic knowledge.”²⁶⁵ We are seeking to know only the content not the cause of revelation. What does revelation reveal? “Here we’re just trying to learn what Scripture teaches . . . We’re not in the least concerned with the causes of the teachings.”²⁶⁶ Even though this is not yet clear, we can begin to relieve the problem concerning the supernatural elements of biblical narrative. Excluding the special status of Jesus Christ, we see that “the Prophets perceived God’s revelations only with the aid of the imagination, i.e., by the mediation of words or of images.”²⁶⁷

We began with a concern that the supernatural aspects of biblical narrations imposed a subordination of philosophical reason to theological dogma. But “now it’s clear why the Prophets perceived and taught almost everything in metaphors and enigmatic sayings, and expressed all spiritual things corporeally. For, all these things agree more with the nature of the imagination.”²⁶⁸ It follows then that prophets did not have a philosophical concept of God because the contents of revelation were consistently expressed through the lens of their imagination. However, this does not mean that their prophecies were false or even that their content was primarily imaginary. It means only that the human imagination was the primary vehicle of prophetic communication (except for Christ). But now a new problem emerges. That is, “since the imagination is random and inconstant,”²⁶⁹ how do prophets “come to be certain of things they perceived only through the imagination, and not from certain principles of the

²⁶⁴ TPT1.44.

²⁶⁵ TPT1.43.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ TPT1.43.

²⁶⁸ TPT1.46.

²⁶⁹ TPT1.47.

mind.”²⁷⁰ In other words, although the imaginary and socio-linguistic conditions in which prophecy was communicated explains the fantastical elements of its stories, they do not explain the standard of its certainty.

Spinoza begins chapter two of the TPT with this very problem. If “the Prophets were not endowed with a more perfect mind, but rather with a power of imagining unusually vividly,”²⁷¹ then how can modern readers, who do not necessarily possess these same powers of imagination, interpret their meaning? We thus encounter a central concept in Spinoza’s theory of interpretation – the concept of imaginary or affective *accommodation*. That is, if the prophets did not possess a more perfect mind than others but only a more vivid power of imagination, then their vivid but nonetheless *human* power of prophesizing would still have been subject to the same passions and prejudices that would affect anyone else. Therefore, “the Prophecies varied, not only with the imagination and bodily temperament of each Prophet, but also with the opinions they were steeped in.”²⁷² The task, therefore, of a biblical scholar, is to identify what is accommodated to the particular imaginations and attitudes of a given prophet and what is common to all sacred prophecies.

On the surface, Spinoza’s theory of accommodation seems to further obscure the contents of revelation because unlike “a clear and distinct idea, a simple imagination does not, by its nature, involve certainty.”²⁷³ If it did, then certainty would be indistinguishable from stubbornness and conviction. However, we know from the *Ethics* that Spinoza’s theory of

²⁷⁰ TPT1.48.

²⁷¹ TPT2.1.

²⁷² TPT2.3.

²⁷³ TPT2.4.

certainty is conceived as its own standard such that a true idea requires nothing outside itself from which it is known as true for the same reason that no one can understand that they understand without having first understood.²⁷⁴ Prophetic certainty should be treated no differently. “As the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false.”²⁷⁵ Thus, if the certainty of a revelation is not derived from its imaginary aspects, then something else will have to be the standard of its certainty (if it has any). “So to be able to be certain of things we imagine, we must add something to the imagination – viz., reasoning . . . So the Prophets were not certain about God’s revelation by the revelation itself, but by some sign.”²⁷⁶ This sign, however, is not a sign in the sense of another image that would retroactively justify the preceding one because this kind of a sign would itself need another sign to be justified, ad nauseum.²⁷⁷ Instead this “sign” should be understood as a signature of confirmation, a sign of certainty.

²⁷⁴ “I ask, who can know that he understands some thing unless he first understands it? That is, who can know that he is certain about some thing unless he is first certain about it? What can there be which is clearer and more certain than a true idea, to serve as a standard of truth?” EIIP43.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ TPT2.4.

²⁷⁷ Central to Deleuze’s theory of expression in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* is an opposition between what he terms “signs” (with which he associates revelation) and “expressions” (with which he associates philosophy), but this opposition completely disregards the non-ancillary relation for which Spinoza argues. The problem with Deleuze’s theory is thus that it becomes impossible to signify our expressions, and equally impossible to express our significations:

“Revelation and expression: never was the effort to distinguish two domains pushed further. Or to distinguish two heterogeneous relations: that of sign and signified, that of expression and expressed . . . So that the “Word of God” has two very different senses: an expressive Word, which has no need of words or signs, but only of God’s essence and man’s understanding; and an impressed, imperative Word, operating through sign and commandment. The latter is not expressive, but strikes our imagination and inspires in us the required submission . . . Any mixing of the two domains is fatal. Whenever one takes a sign for an expression, one sees mysteries everywhere, including, above all, Scripture itself” (57).

Yet, if reason must be added to imagination, then how does this not render prophetic faith ancillary to philosophical reason? It seems as though prophecy is communicated through the uncertain medium of imagination which requires the apparently extrinsic judgement of reason to be considered true. So, what does Spinoza mean by the addition of reason? What kind of reasoning has to be added? We already know that this kind of reasoning is not concerned with the causes with which God communicates His/Her nature to the minds of humans in the “act” of revelation. Spinoza stated that he is ignorant of these causes and is not concerned with them. Rather, the kind of reasoning that Spinoza has in mind is what we have already begun to do – namely, an adequate idea of the affective powers of human imagination. To understand what is certain in prophetic imaginations, we have to develop an adequate idea of the various ways in which human bodies and minds can affect and be affected by things. That is, to understand what is true in the expressions of human imagination, we need an adequate or reasoned idea of what the human imagination is capable of. Therefore, since imaginations do not of their own nature involve adequate ideas, what must be added to the prophetic imagination is an adequate idea. But are adequate ideas the exclusive property of philosophy? I think the answer is no. Spinoza writes that “in each human mind some ideas are adequate,”²⁷⁸ and so if adequate ideas were the exclusive domain of philosophy, then every living human being would have to be considered a philosopher, which seems dubious. I argue instead that Spinoza’s doctrine of adequate ideas refers not only to philosophy but to anything that “follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone.”²⁷⁹ Therefore, adequate ideas are no more the property of philosophy than they are of religion or any other expression of human nature. Hence,

²⁷⁸ EIIIP1 dem.

²⁷⁹ EIIID2.

the necessary addition of an adequate idea to prophetic revelation does not render faith ancillary to reason, or theology to philosophy.

If an adequate idea is the sign that must be added to a prophecy to be certain of its content, then this excludes miracles as a sign of divinity and object of faith. Spinoza explains the religious significance of miracles in quite a different way by citing examples like Genesis 15:8, “where Abraham asked for a sign after he had heard God’s promise.”²⁸⁰ Abraham’s request was not to confirm his faith in God since this was already established in the covenant. What Abraham requested was a sign to confirm that what he had imagined or perceived was, contrary to its grave appearance, indeed consistent with that covenant. “He trusted God, of course, and did not ask for a sign so as to have faith in God. He asked for sign to know that it was God who had made this promise to him.”²⁸¹ Another example can be seen in Deuteronomy 13:2 where Moses declares that “any Prophet who wants to teach new Gods should be condemned to death, *even though he confirms his teaching with signs and miracles.*”²⁸² Christ also issues this same warning against false prophets who employ signs and wonders to confirm their prophecies in Matthew 24:24.²⁸³ Therefore, if prophets became certain of their prophecy through the addition of a sign, then the confirming sign cannot be conceived according to the same imaginary or subjective standard as the prophecy itself.

So what is the standard or sign of prophetic certainty? If it is an adequate idea, then an adequate idea of what? So far, we know that it is not an adequate idea of deduction since we

²⁸⁰ TPT2.4.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² TPT2.5. Emphasis added.

²⁸³ “False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible.” Mathew 24:24.

cannot deduce the contents of revelation. We know that this is not an adequate idea of the causes of prophetic perception because Spinoza has insisted that he is concerned only with the meaning of a doctrine, not with its cause. We also know that it is not an adequate idea of the exceptionality of prophetic intelligence since prophets were not any more learned than other people since the gift of prophecy did not relieve them of their particular prejudices and biases. Spinoza concludes, therefore, that “prophetic certainty was not mathematical, but only moral, as is evident from Scripture itself.”²⁸⁴ Hence, the content of this adequate idea is of a moral nature.

Spinoza posits three essential elements of prophetic certainty: 1) a vivid imagination; 2) a sign; and 3) “this is the chief thing – that they had a heart inclined to the right and the good.”²⁸⁵ In other words, true prophets are individuals with vivid powers of imagination who confirm their prophecies through signs that express a morally certain content. With this criteria we can identify the difference between sacred and superstitious prophets and prophecies. A superstitious prophet inculcates belief through nothing but the vividness of their charismatic imagination and denies the believer insight into its mystified content. This is why prophecies designed to inculcate belief through mystification inevitably emphasize the weakness of human cognition and conjure feelings of intense wonder that subdue critical judgement. The problem of course is that such mysteries and wonders ultimately obscure if not omit the moral certainty of what is “right and good” in the prophecy itself. This is because emphasis on the mystical shifts the focus of divinity from its adequate and certain moral content to the uncertain and mysterious powers of an idol that promises benefit to its idolaters and punishment to its iconoclasts. This is precisely the biblical idea of a *graven-image* that turns the mind away from God and toward an object of finite

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ TPT2.10.

appetite, thereby corrupting faith into obsession. The prohibition against attributing an image to God is thus not a matter of religious censorship but, on the contrary, an interpretive principle that prevents religious faith from collapsing into idolatry.

For since they had not seen the image of God, they could not make an image which would resemble God, but only one which would resemble some other created thing they had seen. So when they worshipped God through that image, they would think, not about God, but about the thing the image resembled.²⁸⁶

This is also why literalist interpretations that read Scripture without distinctions between the sense and meaning of a passage always tend towards superstition.²⁸⁷ After all, both Moses and Jesus warn that miraculous signs do not themselves express a divine content. Consequentially, the biblical idea of God has nothing literally in common with a burning bush any more than it does with a golden calf. These are simply images meant to affect the mind of a singular people at particular times and places in specific ways that modern readers cannot share *literally*. If miraculous interventions in nature were possible, Spinoza shows that they would only cast doubt on the idea of God's existence because a miracle in this sense is an interruption of the necessities according to which God's idea is known. "For otherwise what else are we saying but that God has created a nature so impotent, and established laws and rules for it so sterile, that often he is compelled to come to its aid anew, if he wants it to be preserved and wants things to turn out as

²⁸⁶ TPT1.18.

²⁸⁷ "Anyone who indiscriminately accepts everything contained in Scripture as its universal and unconditional teaching about God, and doesn't know accurately what has been accommodated to the grasp of the common people, will be unable not to confuse the opinions of the common people with divine doctrine, hawk human inventions and fancies as divine teachings, and abuse the authority of Scripture." TPT7.1.

he wished?”²⁸⁸ Miraculous intervention is thus a dissolution of the idea of God, not its proof and “belief in it would make us doubt everything and would lead to Atheism.”²⁸⁹

We thus encounter the religious paradox of revelation: the Bible is at once a source of religious truth and superstition. It is a source of religious truth insofar as it reveals the immanent standard of moral certainty according to which any faith can express a true knowledge of God. But it is also the source of superstition since that doctrine can always be confused with and reduced to the finite elements of its communication. And yet, without the revelation of moral certainty there would be neither religion nor superstition because there would be no absolute standard from which to make the distinction. Given the nature of this paradox, we can see that what Spinoza’s theory of prophecy actually demonstrates is that the superstitious or miraculous aspects of Scripture *presuppose* and therefore *exhibit* the faith of the prophet, but that faith cannot itself be predicated on or constituted by them. Faith produces miracles, but miracles do not produce genuine faith. The idea is not that splitting seas and moving the immovable should produce a belief in the unbelievable, but that “faith as small as a mustard seed” has the power to move mountains.²⁹⁰

According to Spinoza, the sacred content on which prophetic certainty is based is not the pomp and ceremony in which it is often celebrated, or the wondrous spectacles of its narratives. The certainty of prophetic revelation is based only on its moral doctrine.

I’ve often wondered that men who boast that they profess the Christian religion – i.e., love, gladness, peace, restraint, and good faith toward all – would contend so unfairly

²⁸⁸ TPT6.12.

²⁸⁹ TPT6.21.

²⁹⁰ Matt.17:20.

against one another, and indulge daily in the bitterest hatred toward one another, so that each man's faith is known more easily from his hatred and contentiousness than from his love, gladness, etc.²⁹¹

Spinoza's concept of revelation thus does not aim to undermine the divinity of prophets or to undermine the narrational significance of miracles. Instead, Spinoza's aim was to deny those who interpret prophets and their miracles through the principles of skeptical mysticism and/or dogmatic orthodoxy (right opinion). In their zeal to rescue the authority of prophets from their many errors, commentators tend to employ opposing interpretive strategies to justify these contradictions. Some hold that we cannot understand the contradictory passages of Scripture because of their supernaturally divine content, others twist the words of Scripture and seek to speak for it, and make it say things that it otherwise does not.²⁹² But both of these methods inevitably render the moral doctrine of revelation indistinguishable from ignorance and superstition. To point out the absurdity of either position, Spinoza gives the example of the miracle narrated in Josh 10:12–14:

For example, nothing in Scripture is clearer than that Joshua, and perhaps also the author who wrote his story, thought that the sun moves around the earth, that the earth is at rest, and that for some period of time the sun stood still. Nevertheless, there are many who do not want to concede that there can be any change in the heavens, and who therefore explain this passage so that it doesn't seem to say anything like that. Others, who have learned to philosophize more correctly, since they understand that the earth moves,

²⁹¹ TPT preface.14.

²⁹² I am here anticipating the interpretive strategies in the next section that Spinoza attributes to Alfakhar and Maimonides.

whereas the sun is at rest, *or* does not move around the earth, strive with all their powers to twist the same [truth] out of Scripture, though it cries out in open protest against this treatment. They truly amaze me! [27] Are we, I ask, bound to believe that Joshua, a soldier, was skilled in Astronomy? And that the miracle could not be revealed to him, or that the light of the sun could not remain longer than usual above the horizon, unless Joshua understood the cause? Both alternatives seem to me ridiculous. I prefer, then, to say openly that Joshua did not know the true cause of the greater duration of that light, that he and the whole crowd who were present all thought that the sun moves with a daily motion around the earth, and that on that day it stood still for a while.²⁹³

The paradox that Spinoza is showing us is that it is only if we can hold together the divinity *and* the humanity of the prophets that we can avoid reducing their revelations to speculation and mystery.

By asking us to recognize the inconsistencies and contradictions of various prophecies, Spinoza demonstrates not that prophetic revelation is false but that its truth can only be understood and evaluated if it is “accommodated” to the imagination of the prophet. But, as we saw in the previous chapter, to have knowledge of what is in-another necessarily presupposes a knowledge of what is in-itself. Therefore, to distinguish between the imaginary accommodations of prophecy and the clear and distinct ideas of reason through which we recognize those accommodations is not to privilege reason over religion, or a geometrical/mathematical kind of certainty over an inductive/experience based moral certainty.²⁹⁴ It is fundamentally to

²⁹³ TPT2.26–27.

²⁹⁴ In chapter two, “When does Truth Matter? The Relation of Theology and Philosophy,” of Susan James’ *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together*, James criticizes commentators who accuse Spinoza of inconsistency in his arguments to separate of philosophy and theology. “Despite his protestations, they have claimed, he does not succeed in

demonstrate the identity of their content. Spinoza's concept of accommodation allows him to preserve the divine truth of prophetic revelation by distinguishing it from the contingent particularities through which it is expressed (yet irreducible to) in each prophet.

I began this section with a concern for the teleology and superstition that seems rampant in the Bible since this would install an ancillary relation between religious and philosophical knowledge, which Spinoza claims to deny. But we have seen that teleology and supernaturalism only pose a problem to the adequate relation between philosophy and theology if we understand the nature of prophets, prophecy, and miracles inadequately on the basis of imagination alone. If the principles with which we interpret a text are determined by the contingencies of our affects and appetites, then our interpretations will invariably reflect those same contingencies. Equally, if we are stubbornly convinced of a text's falsity in advance, then we will conclude with its falsity in advance, and if we are convinced of its unquestionable perfection in advance, then we will conclude in the same dogmatism with which we began. Skeptical and dogmatic attitudes, therefore, must be absolutely distinguished from what Spinoza considers to be faith of a religious nature because only faith, insofar as it involves a theory of accommodation, presupposes an interpretive principle that distinguishes what is in-itself from what is in-another. Therefore, I

showing that philosophy and theology are mutually independent, but instead gives epistemological precedence to philosophy" (25). James thus positions herself against these commentators and argues that "this objection fails to understand the nature of Spinoza's position and wrongly charges him with inconsistency" (25). James' portrays insight into the paradox when she writes: "Far from separating philosophy and religion, as contemporary naturalists do, Spinoza regards philosophizing as a form of religious activity and an exercise in piety" (25). This is, however, only one side of the paradox. Not only does philosophical reason express an identical content to faith, and so is indeed an exercise in piety, so too is religious interpretation an exercise of reason. It is clear, however, that James has not grasped this other side of the paradox because she associates the moral certainty of the prophetic imagination with the imagination itself and its inductive, experience-based processes. "The method that theology uses is rooted in a kind of thinking that Spinoza calls imagining, which starts from the experience of particular things that we gain through words and images. Our perceptions, memories, passions, and fantasies all belong in this domain. So do the everyday forms of inductive and means-end reasoning that we bring to bear on them . . . Knowledge deriving from imagination in turn possesses an epistemological status that Spinoza characterizes as moral certainty" (28–29). Despite partially grasping the paradox, James undermines the principle of separation with which she began because she does not equally offer a principle of relation or "union." As a result, James ends up subordinating the dubious inductive nature of moral certainty to the indubitable reasoning of mathematical (deductive) certainty.

conclude that religious Scriptures express teleology and superstition only insofar as they deny believers the right (and power) to interpret the universality of its moral doctrine. In other words, Spinoza's concept of true religion (*vera religio*) requires the active participation of interpreters who use their reason to distinguish between what is in-itself and certain, and what is in-another and "accommodated" to the imaginations of specific prophets and peoples. This conceptual structure is identical to the paradox of the ontological argument as presented in the *Ethics*. In both the TPT and the *Ethics*, Spinoza shows that the immanence in which God is known or revealed is predicated on the paradox of a being that exists simultaneously in-itself and in-another.

b. Spinoza's Interpretive Method

Spinoza's hermeneutics centers on the problem of accommodation. The problem is that the contents of Scriptures are expressed through the particular socio-cultural characteristics and institutions of specific historical peoples. But the universal and so adequately religious ideals of those people is supposed to be irreducible to the particularity of the socio-cultural characteristics and institutions that express them. And yet even so, Spinoza suggests that some degree of socio-cultural literacy is helpful in constructing adequate interpretations of religious texts. Otherwise, it is easy to misinterpret the way that ideas are "accommodated" to the conventional language and customs of its historically specific authors and audiences. For example, Spinoza notes that the Hebrews had a linguistic custom of referring to God as the cause or source of both mundane events like a market transactions and fantastical events like those described in miracles.²⁹⁵ So, to

²⁹⁵ TPT1.8.

distinguish between the sacred contents of revelation and a simple linguistic convention it is necessary to have some familiarity with the cultural vernacular and basic characteristics of its authors and audiences. “For whoever does not attend sufficiently to them will ascribe to Scripture many miracles which its writers never intended to relate, so that [they] will know nothing at all, not only about the things and miracles as they really happened, but also about the mind of the authors of the sacred texts.”²⁹⁶ But how can we understand the meanings and teachings of Scriptures if modern readers do not share these same conventions? Without this insight there is a danger that anyone can peddle their “own inventions as the word of God, concerned only to compel others to think as [they do], under the pretext of religion.”²⁹⁷ In this section I show how Spinoza resolves this problem through what I have been calling the paradox of singularity. Spinoza develops a method of interpretation that is at once *universal*, insofar as it follows from the universal powers of reason, and *particular*, insofar as it can be accommodated to the specific affections that most promote and empower an individual’s faith.

I will explain why Spinoza argues that the Bible cannot be adequately interpreted on the relative basis of metaphors or on the purportedly objective deductions of reason, and that the only adequate standard of interpreting Scripture is Scripture itself.²⁹⁸ If we want to understand its narratives and histories then we have to study Scripture methodically, rigorously, and attribute nothing to it that it does not clearly and consistently express. But, at the same time, Spinoza has shown that faith cannot be dictated by an unerring external authority,²⁹⁹ nor can it be expressed

²⁹⁶ TPT6.59.

²⁹⁷ TPT7.1.

²⁹⁸ “All knowledge of Scripture must be sought only from Scripture itself.” TPT7.12.

²⁹⁹ “They’d have to suppose that the Philosophers can’t err concerning the interpretation of Scripture. This would obviously introduce a new authority into the Church, and a new kind of priest, or a High Priest, which the people would mock rather than venerate.” TPT7.79.

by an obsession with the mysterious and unknown.³⁰⁰ To interpret the Bible, therefore, readers will inevitably have to employ their own judgement and thus they will have to interpret Scripture from themselves alone.³⁰¹ I argue through the paradox of singularity that interpreting Scripture through Scripture alone, on the one hand, but also simultaneously through ourselves alone, on the other hand, are not opposed alternatives from which we must choose. Spinoza has shown that the truth and authority of the prophets is entirely consistent with the reader's natural light of reason, and vice versa. Although the text and reader are necessarily separate, in exactly the same way as theology and philosophy, their mutual divinity is co-implicating. On the one hand, no one can have their faith dictated to or for them, but, on the other hand, unless true faith is determined by a mere resemblance to right opinions, then not every interpretation of a faith can, without qualification, be faithful.

It is easy to misunderstand Spinoza's interpretive method by focusing too heavily on the analogy that compares his method of biblical interpretation with something like a scientific method. Is Spinoza suggesting that interpretation is largely an empirical endeavor?

To sum up briefly, I say the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ at all from the method of interpreting nature, but agrees with it completely. [7] 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

³⁰⁰ "And so they will not stop asking for the cause of causes until you take refuge in the will of God, that is, the sanctuary of ignorance." EI appendix.

³⁰¹ "I conclude that each person must be allowed freedom of judgement and the power to interpret the foundations of faith according to [their] own mentality." TPT preface.28.

infer from it the mind of Scripture's authors, by legitimate inferences, as from certain data and principles.³⁰²

The attention that this analogy tends to receive is not entirely inappropriate since Spinoza insists that if we form our interpretations in this way, "everyone will always proceed without danger of error."³⁰³ But the analogy is not as transparent as it might first appear because we saw in the *Ethics* that Spinoza conceives significant differences between the kind of knowledge we have of natural bodies and our own mind. Therefore, if we are to maintain with Spinoza the intuitive adequacy between philosophy and theology, then we should be careful not to transform Spinoza's religious hermeneutics into a deductive calculus. Hence, after Spinoza first posits this natural analogy, he immediately clarifies how it is meant to aid the interpreter. For, even though "we must note that Scripture most often treats things which cannot be deduced from principles known to the natural light,"³⁰⁴ if we follow Spinoza's method carefully, we will still be able to speak meaningfully about it even without a totally exhaustive knowledge of its causes. "So the knowledge of all these things, i.e., of almost everything in Scripture, must be sought only from Scripture itself, just as the knowledge of nature must be sought from nature itself."³⁰⁵

If we are to understand Spinoza without contradiction, we must take the analogy to mean only that we can (and do) have an absolute knowledge of what is whole (perfect) and in itself even if we do not have totally exhaustive knowledge of what is partial (mode) and in another. Thus, just as we interpret nature not from the contingent appearance of its objects and images but

³⁰² TPT7.6–7.

³⁰³ TPT7.8.

³⁰⁴ TPT7.9.

³⁰⁵ TPT7.10.

rather from our adequate ideas regarding what is necessary in them, we should interpret Scripture in the same way. We cannot base our interpretations *only* on the socio-linguistic contingencies of its historical transmission since we know relatively little about these means and are thus not in a strong position to form judgements on this basis. Instead, we should base our religious interpretations on the universal ideas that the historical transmission of its content presupposes since, insofar as we possess a mind with at least one adequate idea, we are innately poised to form adequate judgements on the bases of a moral nature. So, if we are to “testify, *without prejudice*, to the divinity of Scripture, we must establish from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrines. For only from this can its divinity be demonstrated.”³⁰⁶ Spinoza’s theory of interpretation thus situates interpreters of the Bible in exactly the same position as the ancient prophets to whom God was “first” revealed, and whose minds were tested not by fantastic images but by the doctrine of their faith. “We have shown that the Prophets’ certainty is known chiefly from the fact that they had a heart inclined toward the right and the good. So it’s necessary to establish the same thing for us also, if we’re to be able to have faith in them.”³⁰⁷

The “universal rule in interpreting Scripture”³⁰⁸ is thus to impose no rule or principle that Scripture does not itself express and *consistently* affirm. Again, “all knowledge of Scripture must be sought only from Scripture itself.”³⁰⁹ The method first requires that readers catalogue “the nature and properties of the language in which the books of Scripture were written, and which

³⁰⁶ TPT7.11. Emphasis added.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ TPT7.14.

³⁰⁹ TPT7.12.

the Authors were accustomed to speak.”³¹⁰ But this is a great challenge because all the writers of the Torah and Gospel were Hebrews and much of the linguistic knowledge of ancient Hebrew has been lost to time. “Second, it must collect the sentences of each book and organize them under main headings so that we can readily find all those concerning the same subject.”³¹¹ Of these subjects, some must be organized to include those passages whose intended sense appears obscure, ambiguous or inconsistent. As indicated, for example, by his treatment of Joshua’s “miraculous” astronomical observation,³¹² Spinoza is not concerned with the *truth* of these passages but only with what their authors and audiences would have actually thought through them. “In order not to confuse the true meaning with the truth of things, we must seek that meaning solely from linguistic usage, or from reasoning which recognizes no other foundation than Scripture.”³¹³ So in the case of Joshua’s astronomical skill, it is important that we do not confuse the truth of whether or not the sun actually hung motionless in the sky for the reasons that Joshua thought it did with the sense or significance that Joshua (and the Israelites) gave it.

For another example of this second rule that distinguishes the *sense* of a passage from its *truth*, Spinoza points to the consistent Mosaic sayings that “*God is a fire* and that *God is jealous*.”³¹⁴ Despite the obvious falseness involved in these sayings, Spinoza counts these among the clear and unambiguous passages. The point is that the meaning or sense of a person’s words, in this case the words of Moses, should not be based on the predispositions of *our* reason but

³¹⁰ TPT7.15.

³¹¹ TPT7.16.

³¹² TPT2.26–27.

³¹³ TPT7.17.

³¹⁴ TPT7.18.

only on the historical basis of that person's usage. It is only when we know the particular genius (*genium*) and temperament (*ingenium*) of other people – prophets included – that we can be in a position to interpret them. That is, “the better we know someone's spirit and mentality, the more easily we can explain [their] words.”³¹⁵ Spinoza thus shows that since many other passages describe God as fire in a way that conveys a sense of anger and jealousy, as exhibited for example in Job 31:12, we can easily reconcile that *God is fire*, *God is jealous*, and *God is angry* have the same sense or meaning in the Mosaic mode of expression. Hence, “since Moses clearly teaches that God is jealous, and nowhere teaches that God lacks passions *or* passive states of mind,”³¹⁶ we must conclude that this is either what Moses actually believed or it is what he wanted to teach.

The third step of Spinoza's method requires that we fully describe the circumstances of “the life, character, and concerns of the authors of each book, who he was, on what occasion he wrote, at what time, for whom, and finally, in what language.”³¹⁷ Hence, the interpretation must include a thorough catalogue of the causes and conditions involved in the text's historical transmission. But now it seems almost impossible to have a complete understanding of Scripture. According to these criteria, such an exhaustive study is utterly beyond the capacities of even the most rigorous biblical scholar, let alone the common believer. Thus, after proposing the steps of this exegetical method Spinoza seems to indicate its futility. “Those who spoke and wrote Hebrew in ancient times left nothing to posterity regarding its foundations and teachings.

³¹⁵ TPT7.24.

³¹⁶ TPT7.22.

³¹⁷ TPT7.23.

Or at least we have absolutely nothing from them: no Dictionary, no Grammar, no Rhetoric.”³¹⁸

The problem is that so many disasters and persecutions have befallen the Hebrew people over their long history that we lack a basic understanding of even casual words like the names for certain fruits, birds, fish, etc.³¹⁹ Whatever understanding of the nouns and verbs that have survived is “either completely unknown or is disputed.”³²⁰ Not only do we lack the basic building blocks of the language, like many of its words and its grammar, but we also lack a phraseology of Hebrew expressions. “For time, the devourer, has obliterated from the memory of men almost all the idioms and manners of speaking peculiar to the Hebrew nation.”³²¹

This gap in our historical understanding of the ancient Israelites is a problem because it turns communication and interpretation into a game of broken-telephone such that the ideas that words signify come to be lost in translation. And, if left untended this problem quickly spirals into a Tower of Babylon in which communication, mutual understanding, and cooperation become impossible. In an effort to expose and correct this danger, Spinoza began to write, but did not complete before his death, a *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*.³²² Many commentators, however, do not seem to understand the relevance of Spinoza’s *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar* to his theory of interpretation. Curley, for example, who is regarded by many as Spinoza’s leading English translator, controversially decided to omit this text from his two-

³¹⁸ TPT7.45.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ TPT7.46.

³²² Baruch Spinoza, “Hebrew Grammar,” in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, trans. by Samuel Shirley, edited by Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2002), 584–675. The original title in Latin is *Compendium Grammatices Linguae Hebraeae*. Hereafter I shall refer to this text as *Compendium*, cited as CGLH followed by the chapter number and the page number within the Shirley translation.

volume *Spinoza's Collected Works*. Curley's omission then prompted Steven Nadler to pose the title question of his article "Aliquid remanet: What Are We to Do with Spinoza's *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*."³²³ If scholars like Curley consider the *Compendium* peripheral enough to ignore, and if scholars like Nadler do not know what to do with it, then what significance does it have to Spinoza's thought as a whole? Inja Stracenski has offered very compelling arguments for the relevance of the *Compendium* to Spinoza's theory of interpretation in her article "Spinoza's *Compendium of the Hebrew Language*."³²⁴ Stracenski argues that human languages universally involve shared systems of meaning that are expressed through the particularities of grammar and linguistic characteristics. In this way, conventions of connotation, association, allusion, and the disruption of these patterns all contribute to the production of universally shared systems of meaning. The value of Spinoza's *Compendium* then is to offer readers a basic understanding of the conventional patterns and their disruptions that characterize the Hebrew language so that we can follow the same linguistic modifications that would have affected the mind of the ancient authors and audiences.

Spinoza begins the *Compendium* by explaining the basic difference in Hebrew between its alphabetical "letters" and "vowels." What counts as a "letter" in Hebrew are the written transcriptions of consonants, whereas "vowels" are merely signs that were later tagged onto those consonants by Pharisees and Massorites to make it easier for them to read Hebrew.³²⁵ Vowels, according to Spinoza, are therefore not considered to have the status of proper

³²³ Steven Nadler, "Aliquid remanet: What Are We to Do with Spinoza's *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*?" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 56, no. 1 (2018): 155–67.

³²⁴ Inja Stracenski, "Spinoza's *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language*," *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, 32, no.1–2 (2020): 122–44.

³²⁵ CGLH IV, 594-595. As Stracenski indicates, this occurred between the 6th-10th centuries C.E. Stracenski, 126.

alphabetical letters in Hebrew.³²⁶ Thus, since the original biblical texts were scribed without vowels, part of the challenge of its interpretation is the difficulty concerning where to place these vowels so as to adequately reflect dialects of the original Hebraic vocalization system. But because the spoken form of Hebrew is the standard of the written form, many words remain intelligible to us today because of the way they are used as modifications of root-words. That is, written Hebrew can be read today because its root-words are composed of foundational combinations of consonants from which other words are derived. Spinoza therefore argues that since all Hebrew words are subject to the modifications of the vocal system, much like Latin, there are no different parts of speech in biblical Hebrew. All words in Hebrew originally have what Spinoza describes as the force of “nouns.” “For all Hebrew words, except for a few interjections and conjunctions and one or two particles, have the force and properties of nouns. Because the grammarians did not understand this they considered many words to be irregular, which according to the usage of the language are most regular, and they were ignorant of many things, which are necessary to know for a proper understanding of the language.”³²⁷ Spinoza then notes that there are different types of nouns since “there can be either things and attributes of things, modes and relationships, or actions, and modes and the relationships of actions.”³²⁸ All of these, however, express the essential characteristic of nouns which, according to Spinoza, is “a word by which we signify or indicate something that is understood (*sub intellectum cadit*).”³²⁹ Stracenski convincingly argues that what falls under the intellect, that is, what can be *understood* as a noun in Hebrew is precisely the consonant root whose meaning is exhibited in and modified

³²⁶ CGHL I, 588.

³²⁷ CGHL V, 599.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, 600.

³²⁹ *Ibid*.

by all of its derivations. The meaning of these root-words, their various connotations and disruptions, is how the biblical authors and audiences would have understood its stories but have become corrupted by hasty translation.

Two examples in particular convey the ambiguities that follow from prejudicial translations of these root-words. Both of these examples are taken from Stracenski's article but only one is her own. The first example I shall refer to, Stracenski attributes to Shmuel Trigano from his book *L'Hébreu, une Philosophie*, which names Spinoza as an important influence.³³⁰ In the following I shall list the root-word along with its modifications and associations before considering its linguistic usage:

Root: *Alam* – to disappear, to be hidden.

[Derivations:] *Ne'elam* – non-visible, hidden; *Ilem, he'elim* – to hide, to recover; *Hitalelem* – to disappear, to ignore or neglect.

[Associated Connotations:] *Alum* – unknown; *Olam* – world; *Elem* – young, adolescent; *Alma* – young [unmarried] girl.³³¹

In this example which Stracenski cites from Trigano, the biblical Hebrew word “*Alam*” refers to something that is hidden and involves a sense of disappearance. Thus, if we situate this word as it appears, for example, in Isaiah 7:14 and cross-compare its Hebraic sense with its translated sense in the Septuagint (the Latin translated biblical text) we will notice a great disparity.³³² Hebrew audiences would understand the shared connotations and associations between *Alam*, *Elem*, *Olam* and *Alma*. Therefore, they would understand in this context that the “world

³³⁰ Shmuel Trigano, *L'Hébreu, une Philosophie*, (Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2014).

³³¹ Stracenski, 138.

³³² “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Isa. 7:14.

manifests itself in disappearance, in the impossibility of taking hold of it.”³³³ Hence, in the case of Isaiah 7:14 we can understand with the Hebrews that the person who an adolescent shall become is, in a sense, hidden within themselves, or that the adolescent is one who is unknown, hidden to the self they are yet to become. Yet, the Septuagint or Latinized translation understands “*Alma as parthenos/virgin* because it was not thought that something of this world/Olam can give birth to something pure.”³³⁴ Socio-cultural differences like these which are involved in the interpretation of a word are especially concentrated in the heavily theological implications of phrases like “Olam haba” which is “usually translated as ‘the world to come’ and which some have understood as a world separate from this one.”³³⁵ Yet, a “true” world separate from this “false” one would reflect the teleological notion of the Platonic divided-line in which all knowledge is ultimately reduced to its contradictory opposite in ignorance. Contrary to this Greco-Romanization of the Hebraic idea of the Kingdom of God, biblical Hebrews would have understood by a “world to come” simply the world as it *will* and *must* become through the effort of steadfast faith in our social and ethical imperatives. “The ‘rewards’ of such efforts, are nothing else than the real possibility of changing the present.”³³⁶

The other example I shall cite of the Latin obfuscation of Hebrew roots and the ideas they express is the word we conventionally translate as “God.”

Root: *Hyh [or Yhwh]* – to be, to become, to accompany, to be with.³³⁷

³³³ Stracenski, 138.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid., 139.

Spinoza emphasizes the very special linguistic status of the word for God in Hebrew. This is because in Hebrew the infinitive for “to be” is a single word that designates “a being who exists, has always existed, and always will exist. For this reason [Moses] calls him by the name יהוה *Yahweh*, which in Hebrew expresses these three [tenses] of existing.”³³⁸ Thus, we can infer that since the word for God contains all temporal tenses the Hebrew idea of God refers to an absolute infinity or a perfect whole of existence. That is, it refers to the *being* of being itself from which and in relation to which all finite beings in existence are established. This means that, contrary to our cultivated assumptions of religious dogma, there is no word for ‘God’ in the biblical text that could correspond to the conventional Greek *Theos* in the figure of Zeus or the Latin *Deus* in the figure of Jupiter. If we attend only to how the sense of the original Hebrew noun is used, if we attend only to its *force*, we will see that it at once refers to both the absolute Being of being and its infinite modifications. We shall therefore find no singular figure of God narrated by biblical Hebrew texts that are comparable to a Zeus or a Jupiter. What we shall find instead are the modifications of pure being expressed in Hebrew as: “*El* (true divinity), *Elohim* (creative power, principle of justice), *Adonai* (Lord, i.e., the name [of high status]), *Ha’shem* ([the] Name), *El Shaddai* (the One [who] suffices), *El Elyon* (the Highest), *Shekhinah* (the presence of [the infinite being in the world]), *Hamakom* (the Place where the infinite being dwells).”³³⁹

With these insights into the character and conventions of the Hebrew language, we can see quite clearly that Spinoza’s method is not as futile as it might first seem. Despite the obscurities and challenges that haunt Spinoza’s cataloguing, his method presupposes “that one

³³⁸ TPT2.36.

³³⁹ Stracenski, 140. I have substituted in square brackets some phrasing of Stracenski’s Hebrew translation for improved clarity.

tradition of the Jews is uncorrupted”³⁴⁰ by its historical transmission – namely the signification of their most commonly spoken words. It is precisely the roots of words that remain uncorrupted because the meaning of words cannot be guarded by an elite class of grammarians, translators, and/or interpreters but only by the ubiquity of a practice. Despite lacking many words, phrases, and basic elements of the language and culture, those basic roots of the Hebrew language that *have* survived are uncorrupted because the democracy of interpretation is incorruptible. “For it could never be to anyone’s advantage to change the meaning of a word,”³⁴¹ even if someone may benefit from changing the meaning of particular passages in particular texts. If anyone did ever undertake to change the meaning of a particular word in a language, then anything and everything which had been previously expressed using that word would also have to be rewritten. It would also mean that whoever undertook such fraudulence would have to remember and consistently adhere to their imposture in everything they say. The meaning of the words and the expressions of a language are determined by no one authority or elite group, but only by their life and use in the communities in which they operate. A language is thus not composed of dead letters and mute grammars, but by the collective life and strivings of a particular people. Thus,

. . . both the common people and the learned preserve language; but only the learned preserve books and the meanings of utterances. So we can easily conceive that the learned could have changed or corrupted the meaning of an utterance in some very rare book which they had in their power, but not that they could have changed the meaning of words.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ TPT7.40.

³⁴¹ TPT7.40.

³⁴² TPT7.42.

Therefore, despite the many challenges that limit our ability to empirically study Scripture, something of its universally divine nature nonetheless remains. “For things which by their nature are easily perceived can’t be said so obscurely that they aren’t easily understood. As the proverb says: to anyone who understands a word is enough.”³⁴³ Indeed “a word is enough” because of the inherently democratic nature of language in which every single person who attaches ideas to words has a stake in their expression and interpretation.

Spinoza emphasizes this universal aspect of language with another analogy but this time by pointing to Euclid who “wrote only about things quite simple and most intelligible. Anyone can easily explain his work in any language.”³⁴⁴ There is something so universally perceivable by the human mind regarding the basic propositions of Euclidian geometry that to understand his axioms, definitions, propositions, etc., we “don’t need a complete knowledge of the language he wrote in.”³⁴⁵ However, much like Spinoza’s former analogy between divine and natural knowledge, the meaning of this analogy requires some unpacking. It is tempting to read Spinoza’s Euclidian analogy as a subordination of moral knowledge (faith) to mathematical/geometric reason. But this is untenable because what Spinoza describes as “perceptible things” erases any conceivable hierarchy between moral and mathematical certainty.

By things one can perceive I understand not only those legitimately demonstrated, but also those we’re accustomed to embrace with moral certainty and hear without wonder, even if they can’t be demonstrated in any way. Everyone grasps Euclid’s propositions before they’re demonstrated. Thus I also call perceptible and clear those stories of things,

³⁴³ TPT7.66.

³⁴⁴ TPT7.67.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

both future and past, which don't surpass human belief, as well as laws, institutions, and customs (even if they can't be demonstrated mathematically). Those obscure symbols and stories which seem to surpass all belief, I call impossible to perceive.³⁴⁶

The equivalent perceptibility of moral and mathematical certainty, therefore, recapitulates the non-ancillary relation between philosophy and theology because moral corruption and deductive error are perceivable only on the basis of an incorruptible truth that is its own standard. We have seen that much of the ancient Hebrew language is lost to time and that there are many obscurities and ambiguities in what remains. Yet even so, "since our mind – simply from the fact that it contains God's Nature objectively in itself, and participates in it – has the power to form certain notions which explain the nature of things and teach us how to conduct our lives, we can rightly maintain that the nature of the mind . . . is the first cause of divine revelation."³⁴⁷ Hence, the mind has the power to interpret the contents of revelation because the nature of the mind is also the primary cause of revelation. Therefore, insofar as the human mind can understand itself, each and every human mind is equally capable of philosophical reason and theological faith. We could know neither that we as individuals nor the Bible itself were replete with errors if we did not also have available to us the standard of their absolutely certain truth.

Spinoza thus reveals the paradox that if Scripture is the sacred and uncorrupted word of God it is because we understand that it is replete with errors, that its original text vanished ages ago, and yet its truth does not depend on dead letters but on the life and mind of the reader.

Paradoxically, unless readers account for error in both Scripture and in themselves, they will

³⁴⁶ TPT7.66.n32.

³⁴⁷ TPT1.5.

inevitably conflate the two and reduce Scripture to superstition and themselves to an arbitrary dogmatism or skepticism that would have identical conditions.

Those who consider the Bible, just as it is, as a Letter God has sent men from heaven, will no doubt cry out that I have committed a sin against the Holy Ghost, because I've maintained that the word of God is faulty, mutilated, corrupted, and inconsistent; that we have only fragments of it, and finally, that the original text of the covenant God made with the Jews has been lost. [Yet they must nonetheless agree that] reason itself and the statements of the Prophets and Apostles clearly proclaim that God's eternal word and covenant, and true religion, are inscribed by divine agency in [people's] hearts, i.e., in the human mind, and that this is the true original text of God, which he himself stamped with his seal, i.e., with the idea of him, as an image of his divinity.³⁴⁸

The paradoxical singularity of Spinoza's theory of interpretation is thus readily apparent. We began our consideration of Spinoza's hermeneutics with the apparently arduous program of exegesis with which we could investigate the accommodated affects of the prophets. By doing so, we were trying to accumulate an understanding of what is in-another. But it turns out that this necessarily presupposes a knowledge of what is perceivable to the mind in-itself, without which we could not have an idea of accommodation in the first place. The paradox is that this method of interpretation emphasizes the universal and particular at once without hierarchy. It is universal since it applies to every human mind without exception, and particular since, like the prophets themselves, the certainty of faith is accommodated to the personality of the interpreter:

³⁴⁸ TPT12.1.

Therefore, since each person has the supreme right to think freely, even about Religion, and it's inconceivable that anyone can abandon [their] claim to this right, each person will also have the supreme right and the supreme authority to judge freely concerning Religion, and hence to explain it and interpret it for [themselves].³⁴⁹

For, if the divine law of Scripture is expressed by the very essence of the mind, and if the nature of the mind is the primary cause of divine revelation, then “the standard of interpretation must be nothing but the natural light common to all, not any supernatural light or external authority.”³⁵⁰ This “natural light,” however, is no more the light of reason than it is the light of faith, it is simply the natural light of what is its own standard, of what illuminates both itself and the darkness.³⁵¹

Spinoza insists that this is not simply the best method of interpretation, it is really the *only true* method interpretation. “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.”³⁵² But given the pluralism that his method clearly encourages, why does Spinoza exclude other methods? The reason for this is clear if we consider the two alternative methods of interpretation that Spinoza associates with those of Maimonides and Alfakhar. If the method with which we interpret Scripture is not in-itself and absolute as Spinoza insists, that is, if the principle by which we interpret a text were not simultaneously immanent to both the reader and what is read, then there are really only two alternatives: either we subordinate Scripture, and so faith, to reason, or

³⁴⁹ TPT7.91.

³⁵⁰ TPT7.94.

³⁵¹ “As the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false.” EIIP43schol.

³⁵² TPT7.43. Emphasis added.

we subordinate reason to faith and so conceive both in terms of a skeptical and dogmatic ignorance.

In chapter fifteen of the TPT,³⁵³ Spinoza describes the alternatives to his method as those proposed by skeptics and dogmatists. “The skeptics, who deny the certainty of reason, defend the accommodation of reason to Scripture. The dogmatists defend the accommodation of Scripture to reason.”³⁵⁴ The method of Maimonides’ Aristotelian dogmatism is that wherever contradictions and ambiguities arise in Scripture, deductive reason should be the judge. But Spinoza, who understands the identical inadequacy of Platonic and Aristotelian thought, immediately condemns the Aristotelianism of Maimonides’ method in *Guide of the Perplexed* because it purports to explain Hebraic theology through (non-Hebraic) Aristotelian logic.³⁵⁵ Maimonides, like Plato and Aristotle before him, conceived reason in terms of its teleological ends which, coincidentally, just so happen to resemble his own prejudices. For, if Aristotelian logic is the measure of Scripture, then the truth of a faith suddenly requires the unerring authority not of pope but of a “philosopher king” – namely, an expert in Aristotelian thought.

Again, if this opinion were true, it would follow that the common people, who for the most part have no knowledge of demonstrations, and don’t have time for them, wouldn’t be able to accept anything about Scripture except on the authority and testimonies of those who philosophize. They’d have to suppose that the Philosophers can’t err

³⁵³ “Showing that Theology should not be the [ancillary] of Reason, nor Reason the [ancillary] of Theology, and the reason which persuades us of the authority of the Holy Scripture.” TPT15.

I replace Curley’s translation of “handmaiden” with my preferred term “ancillary” which I place in square brackets. I prefer this translation because while *ancilla/ancillae* is the singular/plural of Spinoza’s Latin which translates to “handmaid,” it is also the etymological root of the English word “ancillary” which signifies the same thing without the pejoratively gendered language.

³⁵⁴ TPT15.1

³⁵⁵ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Chaim Rabin (Hackett: Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1952).

concerning the interpretation of Scripture. This would obviously introduce a new authority into the Church, and a new kind of priest, or a High Priest, which the people would mock rather than venerate.³⁵⁶

Spinoza goes on to deny Maimonides' method from an etymological, linguistic, and historical point of view, but the main thing that concerns us here is Maimonides' dogmatism of reason. What alarms Spinoza about Maimonides' method is not only the "useless" absurdity of its premise but more specifically the very real harm that this method can do. The idea that authorities, philosophical, stately, religious, or otherwise, are permitted to explain and twist the words of any given individual according to their preconceived schemas is a deeply dangerous idea. Thus, "his method completely takes away all the certainty the common people can have about the meaning of Scripture from a natural reading of it, and which everyone can have by following another method. So we condemn Maimonides' opinion as not only useless, but harmful and absurd."³⁵⁷

Let us now consider Rabbi Judah Alfakhar's method, "who, in his desire to avoid Maimonides' error, fell into the opposite mistake."³⁵⁸ Contrary to Maimonides' dogmatism of reason, Alfakhar's mystical skepticism conversely holds that nothing in Scripture should be taken metaphorically or adapted to our understanding insofar as it appears contrary to reason. Instead, we should only interpret Scripture figuratively, and even then, only according to the clear figures dictated by Scripture itself, when Scripture explicitly contradicts itself. That is, we

³⁵⁶ TPT7.79.

³⁵⁷ TPT7.87.

³⁵⁸ TPT15.4. As I noted at the end of chapter 2.b, whether or not Spinoza accurately represents the views of Alfakhar is not particularly important here. What is important is not who we hold accountable to Spinoza's criticisms, but simply that we understand them.

should prioritize the clear doctrines dictated by Scripture and evaluate the less clear doctrines and narrations in light of these. “From this he forms a universal rule: whatever Scripture teaches as doctrine, and affirms in explicit terms, must be admitted unconditionally as true, simply in virtue of the authority of Scripture.”³⁵⁹ Alfakhar almost seems to get farther than Maimonides since he realizes that Scripture can only be explained by Scripture. “But once we’ve unearthed the true meaning, we must, necessarily use judgement and reason to give it our assent.”³⁶⁰ For, if we subordinate reason to Scripture, “I ask whether we ought to subordinate it with reason or without it, like blind men?”³⁶¹ It is absurd to suppose that anyone could judge to give up their power of judgement or could be certain that the powers of reason are uncertain.

Spinoza’s method of interpretation is thus the *only* adequate method with which to interpret Scripture because its alternatives invariably conclude in the contradictory opposition with which they begin. We can see here, therefore, the moral and religious consequences that occur when theologians and philosophers alike have not thrown off the yoke of Platonic and Aristotelian principles. “It wasn’t enough for them to be insane with the Greeks, they wanted to the Prophets to rave with them.”³⁶² Maimonides’ dogmatism of reason recapitulates the Socratic figure who contradicts but does not know who or what is contradicted. By conforming the meanings and expressions of others to the geometrical deductions of “reason,” Maimonides demonstrates only that he is ignorant of who these others are, and what they have said such that

³⁵⁹ TPT15.5.

³⁶⁰ TPT15.8.

³⁶¹ TPT15.9.

³⁶² TPT preface.19.

they must be spoken for. Maimonides' "only concern is to extort from Scripture Aristotelian rubbish and [his] own inventions. Nothing seems to me more ridiculous."³⁶³

Alfakhar's mystical skepticism also recapitulates the figure of Socrates. For, in exactly the same way that we saw Socrates claim that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing, so too do mystics and skeptics confirm that their only certainty is the dubiousness of reason.

They think it pious to trust nothing to reason and their own judgment, but impious to doubt the good faith of those who handed down the Sacred Books to us. That's just folly, not piety. What are they worried about? What are they afraid of? Can't religion and faith be defended unless [people] deliberately make themselves ignorant of everything, and say farewell to reason completely? If that's what they believe, they're more fearful for Scripture than trusting in it.³⁶⁴

Spinoza's method is thus the *only* method because the alternatives require that we either give up our faith to skeptical reason or that we give up our reason to dogmatic faith, but since we have seen that they express a paradoxically identical content, to give up either is to give up both. Contrary to the alternatives, Spinoza's method of interpretation encourages us to have reasons for our faith, and faith in our reason because "the true original text of God's word"³⁶⁵ is not written in any language, however archaic and obscure. It is inscribed in the very text of the human mind. Therefore, to interpret Scripture through Scripture itself ultimately means to interpret it through the intuitive moral certainty that constitutes the divinity of both the text and its interpreter. It means that the standard by which we evaluate Scripture is immanent to the

³⁶³ TPT1.19.

³⁶⁴ TPT15.11.

³⁶⁵ TPT15.10.

nature of the mind, but equally vice versa, that the standard by which we evaluate the moral content of a mind is equally immanent to Scripture.

In conclusion, Spinoza's hermeneutics is at once universal and particular. The method is universal for three primary reasons. Firstly, its methodological cataloguing follows from the common notions of reason;³⁶⁶ secondly, the linguistic vehicle of interpretation is inherently and incorruptibly democratic in nature; thirdly, the moral certainty of its content is expressed by an intuitive and yet paradoxical property of the human mind that knows itself insofar as it knows God, and knows God insofar as it knows itself. The paradox is thus that the standard of a true interpretation is not the unilateral authority of a text over its reader, nor a reader over their text, but both at once in dialogical relation. True interpretations are only possible in the first place if a text is adequate to its reader, and simultaneously, if readers are adequate to their texts.

Otherwise, there will be no perceivable standard of error and the divine will be conflated with the human, and the human with the divine. Yet, the text is not identical to the reader, and the reader is not identical to the text. Hence, we must also understand how Spinoza's theory of interpretation accounts for the particular in the expression of the universal. This will be the focus of the next. I will argue that particular interpretations must be accommodated to the specific affections through which historically situated peoples imagine themselves in exactly the same way that the ancient prophets had done. At the same time, however, this imaginary accommodation must be flexible enough so to preserve its universality in the face of the ever-changing dynamics of a body-politic. Hence, Spinoza's interpretive method is universal because

³⁶⁶ Spinoza's theory of common notions is presented in EIIP37–P40 but the idea is outlined earlier as for example in the TPT6.17.n7.

it is caused by the universal nature of the human mind, but it is also particular because this universal nature is always accommodated in particular ways.

c. Monism = Pluralism

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I sought to explain the paradoxical equality through which Spinoza simultaneously relates and distinguishes philosophical reason and theological faith. This was because some scholars in the secondary literature argue that Spinoza's concepts reason and faith should be separated, and that ultimately one must be accommodated to the other. "The skeptics, who deny the certainty of reason, defend the accommodation of reason to Scripture. The dogmatists defend the accommodation of Scripture to reason. But what we've already said shows that both parties are completely mistaken. Whichever opinion we follow, we must corrupt either reason or Scripture."³⁶⁷ Contrary to a hierarchical relation, I have argued that reason is inescapably essential to the interpretation of a faith for Spinoza because the contents of revelation necessarily involve the judgement of the interpreter. If, therefore, reason is still in a position to judge and evaluate the contents of a faith, it is because reason and faith necessarily share something in common. But to maintain the ontological reciprocity of reason and faith I must also be able to demonstrate the inverse. I have so far argued that the contents of faith are subject to reason, but is it equally the case for Spinoza that faith is also subject to reason? In other words, if reason is the standard of faith, is faith also the standard of reason? I argue in this concluding section that since there is no knowledge of God that is not also a love of God, and, since there is no love without fidelity (faith) – then yes, just as faith is subject to reason, so too is reason subject to faith. Thus, if faith cannot be adequately conceived as a "blind" belief in the

³⁶⁷ TPT15.1-2.

imperceptible, what is this a faith *in* and what is faith *for*? If Spinoza argues that individuals are free to interpret and explain Scripture for themselves (whatever their Scriptures may be), how is a universal and absolute standard possible? How is it possible to distinguish *absolutely* between a true faith from a superstitious belief without imposing a homogeneity of religious imagination?

As we have seen, what Spinoza considers to be true in a religious faith cannot be confirmed by miracles or wonders but only by the *moral certainty* that it involves. Thus, the certainty of biblical prophecy is that “[prophets] had a heart inclined only to the right and good.”³⁶⁸ But what is exactly is *the right and the good*? Is it a lofty and speculative subject that only the intellectual or religious elite can be trusted to safeguard? Clearly not since we have seen Spinoza lament the private interests of elites that corrupt the contents of Scripture through their exclusive monopoly on its interpretation. A “true faith” (*vera religio*) must express a kind of universality such that its moral certainty can be perceived by anyone. Therefore, whatever the *right and good* is it must be of a relatively simple, intuitive sort such that it does not require the authority and “expertise” of elites. Spinoza is consistent that “the difficulty of understanding Scripture lies only in its language, not in the loftiness of its theme.”³⁶⁹ After all, the ancient Hebrews did not preach only to elect scholars, but to all Hebrews without exception and the later Apostles tended to preach the Gospel in the most public places.³⁷⁰ This is why interpreters like Maimonides and Alfakhar who attribute lofty speculations to Scripture ultimately obscure its universal content such that its truth cannot be distinguished from its errors. Speculative and exclusionary methods like these are thus “nothing but the inventions of Aristotle or Plato or

³⁶⁸ TPT2.10.

³⁶⁹ TPT13.3.

³⁷⁰ “. . . the Prophets did not preach to the wise, but to all Jews, without exception, and that the Apostles customarily taught the doctrine of the Gospel in the Churches, places where everyone met.” TPT13.3.

someone else like that.”³⁷¹ Spinoza thus argues that if Scripture does not teach speculative matters or any sort of complicated subject, this is because “it requires nothing from [people] but obedience, and condemns only stubbornness, not ignorance.”³⁷² But if faith is identical with simple obedience, then what or who are we obeying insofar as we are faithful? What is the difference between faith and stubbornness?

The difference is that obedience to a faith cannot be conceived as a conformity to an assumedly unerring authority, whatever or whoever that may be. The very claim to unerring authority, as we have seen, is evidence either of an individual’s ignorance such that they lack an idea through which error could be recognized (skepticism), or of their repression and censorship of external judgement (dogmatism). Therefore, the obedience involved in true faith should not be confused with the stubbornness of bondage to dogmatic or skeptical principles. In the case of Maimonides’ dogmatism obedience is conceived without the reciprocated consent of the object of belief (Scripture). In the case of Alfakhar’s mystical skepticism, obedience is conceived without the reciprocated consent of the believer. So, on the one hand, we would have a subject of faith without a faithful object, on the other hand, we have an object of faith without a faithful subject. Hence, the principle or standard of faithful obedience must apply equally and reciprocally between the object of faith (the text) and the subject of faith (the interpreter).

Spinoza argues that the divine law and moral certainty of Scripture is not obscure or complex and is consistently affirmed in biblical Scripture through the ubiquitous consensus of its prophets. According to Paul, for example, “obedience to God consists only in the love of your neighbour – for as Paul says in Romans 13:8, he who loves his neighbour in order that he may

³⁷¹ TPT13.5.

³⁷² TPT13.6.

obey God has fulfilled the Law.”³⁷³ Scripture thus identifies the knowledge of and faith in God with the practice of justice and loving-kindness, and so this is the sole standard of religious truth.

Jeremiah teaches this most explicitly. [21] For in 22:15[–16], speaking of King Josiah, he says . . . *Your father, indeed, ate and drank, and passed judgment, and did justice, and then (it was) well with him; he judged the right of the poor and the needy, and then (it was) well with him; for this is to know me, said Yahweh.* No less clear is the passage in 9:23 . . . *let each one glory only in this, that he understands me and knows me, that I Yahweh practice loving-kindness, judgment and justice on the earth, for I delight in these things, says Yahweh.*³⁷⁴

Moses also affirms this divine attribute in Exodus 34:6–7.³⁷⁵ “There, when Moses wants to see and to come to know him, God reveals only those attributes which display divine Justice and Loving-kindness.”³⁷⁶ Spinoza could have cited any number of passages from the Torah and Gospel in support of the argument that Abrahamic faith in the divinity of God is identical with an obedience to the absolute principles of justice and charity. A personal favourite of mine, however, is a parable from the Talmud in which a non-Jew challenged Hillel the Elder to convert him on the condition that Hillel teach him the whole Torah while he stood on one foot. Hillel accepted and replied: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to another; that is the entire Torah,

³⁷³ TPT13.8.

³⁷⁴ TPT13.20–21.

³⁷⁵ “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin . . .’” Exod.34:6–7.

³⁷⁶ TPT13.22.

the rest is its interpretation. Go study.”³⁷⁷ Thus, we see that Paul, Jeremiah, Moses, Hillel the Elder, and indeed all divine prophets, “sum up the knowledge of God each person is bound to have by locating it only (as we maintained) in this: that God is supremely just and supremely merciful, *or*, that he is the unique model of the true life.”³⁷⁸

Yet, Spinoza has also argued that the difficulty in interpreting Scripture lies in the obscurity of its language and the translational corruptions of its historical transmission. So why should this one dictate be an exception to the general linguistic and historical obscurities in which it is situated? Why does Spinoza consider this law to be the sacred word of God, while he considers the other dictates of Scripture to refer to merely historically contingent institutions and ceremonies? What, according to Spinoza, makes something sacred?

What is called sacred and divine is what is destined for the practice of piety and religion. It will be sacred only so long as [people] use it in a religious manner. If they cease to be pious, at the same time it too ceases to be sacred. And if they dedicate the same thing to impious purposes, then what before was sacred is made unclean and profane.³⁷⁹

Scripture itself affirms this idea of the sacred and divine with a number of examples. In Genesis 28:16–19 we read the Patriarch Jacob refer to the Holy Temple as *the house of God* “because it was there that he worshipped God who had been revealed to him.”³⁸⁰ But later prophets lamented the defilement of the Temple by Israelites who had used it to offer sacrifice to their idols.³⁸¹ So,

³⁷⁷ Shabb.31a.

³⁷⁸ TPT13.23.

³⁷⁹ TPT12.9.

³⁸⁰ TPT12.10.

³⁸¹ 1 Kings 12:27–33.

because the prophets saw that the Temple was no longer used for holy purposes, they called it *the house of iniquity*.³⁸² What was sacred in the Temple was not conferred by stone or ceremony but by the active practices for which it had been used – namely, for administering the justice and charity of the community. Hence, the reason why the golden-rule of Scripture has survived uncorrupted by historical transmission is because its use, and therefore its sacredness, is beyond the corrupting powers of any one individual or group. “For matters that by their nature are easily grasped can never be so obscurely phrased that they cannot be readily understood.”³⁸³

The standard with which we evaluate the moral content of a true faith does not depend on any particular grammar, language, or syntax because the words that communicate a faith and its doctrine have absolutely no meaning independent of the way of life they effect:

Words have a definite meaning only from their use. If they should be so organized that, according to their usage, they move the people reading them to devotion, then those words will be sacred. So will a book written with the words organized that way. But if, afterward, the usage should be lost, so that the words have no meaning, or if the book should be completely neglected, whether from malice or because [people] no longer need it, then neither the words nor the book will be of any use. They will lose their holiness. Finally, if the same words should be organized in another way, or a usage should prevail according to which they are to be taken in an opposite meaning, then the words and the book which were previously sacred will be unclean and profane. [12] From this it follows

³⁸² See Amos 5:5 and Hosea 10:5.

³⁸³ TPT7.66.

that nothing is sacred or profane or impure in itself, outside the mind, but only in relation to the mind.³⁸⁴

Thus, we can guarantee the incorruptibility of the divine law of *caritas* or love of neighbour even though the historical transmission of Scripture has not always preserved the same accents for vowels, letters, and words of its original documents. We can guarantee this because what is sacred and divine in the golden-rule is not realized in any particular phrasing or grammar but is realized only by its use on which the meaning of grammars, phrases and words depend.

So no one can doubt that we have received the divine law without it being corrupted in this way. From Scripture itself we have perceived its most important themes without any difficulty or ambiguity: to love God above all else, and to love your neighbour as yourself. But this cannot be forged, nor can it be something written by a hasty or erring pen. For if Scripture ever taught anything other than this, it would also have had to teach everything else differently, since this is the foundation of the whole religion. If it were taken away, the whole structure would collapse in a moment . . . [35] That would be noticed immediately by everyone; no one could have distorted this without his wickedness being obvious.³⁸⁵

The divine law, therefore, is sacred and incorruptible because its sacredness depends on the practices of a community, not on any one person. It is because this certainty is universally intuitive to each member of the community that no one person who might benefit from its corruption could do so without that corruption being exposed and undermined. The moment that

³⁸⁴ TPT12.11–12.

³⁸⁵ TPT12.34–35.

an adequately intuitive idea is known to the self-conscious mind so too inadequate ideas are known because “the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, [and] so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false.”³⁸⁶ As soon as a standard of sacredness is known, so also are the standards of superstition and idolatry. For example, the idolatry of the golden-calf in the story of Exodus could not have been considered idolatrous before the covenant that the Hebrews made with God through Moses but only afterwards since there is no sin where there is no law. And so, if there is nothing sacred or profane, true or false, except in its relation to the universally intuited ideas of the mind then there is also nothing in itself – no word, image, text, ritual, institution, etc. – which human beings cannot use in graven and idolatrous ways.

Just as what was once sacred can become profaned, so too what was once profane can become sacred so long as its use affects the mind with a steadfast devotion and fidelity to the divine law (*caritas*) in whatever form it may happen to take. For this reason, the good at which the sacred law of Scripture aims has no specific form or image that would contradict or exclude other forms and expressions. The divine law therefore expresses the paradox of singularity in a few ways. The golden-rule is absolute because it is the standard of itself and cannot be derived from prior principles without introducing a division that dissolves its sacred nature. For, we do not freely pursue freedom for anything but its own sake because it is good in itself without any external qualification. Therefore, no one can be considered faithful simply because they hold the right opinions, say the right words, or attend the right places of worship since all of these things can be determined by the contingencies of reward and punishment.³⁸⁷ And, at the same time, the golden rule/divine law can take an infinity of forms and interpretations not only without losing

³⁸⁶ EIIP43schol.

³⁸⁷ “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.” EVP42.

that divinity but empowering it. The paradox is that as the object of the good is shared, divided, and interpreted, its sacredness multiplies. And this is why Spinoza argues in the *Ethics* that “the more an image is joined with other images, the more often it flourishes.”³⁸⁸ For, the more things we associate with an image the more causes there are that affect the mind with its idea. In other words, the more images a mind can associate with a particular idea then the more occasions there will be to think it.

I am reminded here of the miracle of the bread and fishes that Jesus practiced upon dining with the Pharisees and Sadducees. On the one hand, this story seems at first to relate the fantastical and unusual nature of miracles common to prophecy. After all, bread and fish are finite objects that divide finitely. And to divide what is finite into infinite portions (or, at least to divide seven loaves and a few small fish to fill four thousand hungry souls) would seem to interrupt the necessary laws of nature according to which finite things divide finitely. But only a few lines further readers will find that what Jesus shared to satiate those hungry souls was not bread and fish but the principle of a doctrine. Just after the initial miracle, we read Jesus warn his disciples to “beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,”³⁸⁹ which had confused them because they did not bring any bread with them nor had they been given any from their hosts. Jesus, however, retorts: “Ye of little faith! . . . Do you still not understand? Don’t you remember the four thousand I fed with seven loaves, with baskets left over? How is it you don’t understand that I was not talking to you about bread?”³⁹⁰ It is here that his disciples, including the reader, realize that what Jesus had infinitely divided was not leavened grain but the principles of a

³⁸⁸ EVP13.

³⁸⁹ Matt.16:6.

³⁹⁰ Matt.16:8–11.

doctrine. It was not fish and bread by which the multitude were fed, but the holy mana of God, the One who suffices. The warning, therefore, is to beware the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees who, in their request that Jesus show them a sign from heaven, expose the superstition of their doctrine. For, by a sign from heaven they seem to expect parting clouds and a sunbeam from heaven, not the divine law of universal charity. The doctrine of their faith, therefore, is not a love of God expressed as a love for others, but a love for the rewards of spectacle and a fear of punishment. Unlike bread, fish, or any other finite object, only love and knowledge have the divine power to multiply as they are divided and shared. Thus, the more malleable and compatible our imaginary associations of divinity are, that is, the greater diversity of images that turn our mind towards the right and good of *caritas*, then the greater too is our faith.

I can now answer the questions with which I began this concluding section. I asked what constitutes the content of an adequate and true faith? What is faith *for*? And finally, how can we conceive a universal standard with which to evaluate a faith without imposing a homogeneity of religious imagination? We now know both what faith *is* and what faith is *for* because Spinoza has shown that faith cannot be adequately understood as blind belief in what surpasses our powers of understanding, and we know that faith cannot be conceived as a means to some end other than itself. We must therefore conclude that faith is defined and conceived as the inward obedience to principles that multiply and empower our individual desires to act honestly and lovingly towards God, ourselves, and others. “According to our fundamental principle, faith must be defined as the holding of certain beliefs about God such that, without these beliefs, there cannot be obedience to God, and if this obedience is posited, these beliefs are necessarily

posited.”³⁹¹ Thus understood, this definition of faith does not require that our religious beliefs reflect philosophical truths, like those of geometry that Spinoza is so fond of illustrating, but only such beliefs that empower and strengthen our desire to love our neighbour as ourselves, and God above all. “It is only because of this love that each of us (to speak with John) is in God and that God is in each of us.”³⁹² Faith and love, as such, are equally substantial because they express the *causa-sui* of God or substance. Neither can be compelled by reward or punishment, true faith is necessarily caused by and aims at nothing other than faith itself. In other words, the good that defines faith and love is not instrumental insofar as they are good for other things like prestige, wealth, etc. To have faith in love and to love faith are ends-in-themselves, and therefore their goodness is absolute. Thus, Spinoza’s concept of faith is substantial and participates in the *causa-sui* of the divine nature because it exists in-itself and for-itself. This is precisely what reason cannot perceive on its own and why “I judge the utility, even necessity, of Sacred Scripture, *or* revelation, to be very great. We can’t perceive by the natural light that simple obedience is a path to salvation. Only revelation teaches that this happens.”³⁹³ Only faith can

³⁹¹ Baruch Spinoza, “Theological-Political Treatise,” *Spinoza: Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, 516. I have chosen not to cite Curley’s translation of this passage in preference for Shirley’s rendition because Curley seems to confuse the faithful principle of “belief” with the epistemic principle of knowledge when he translates Spinoza as saying: “[Faith is] thinking such things about God that if you had no knowledge of them, obedience to God would be destroyed, whereas if you are obedient to God, you necessarily have these thoughts.” TPT14.13, Curley translation. This phrasing makes it seem as though true faith requires true knowledge of God, which is the case only in the moral sense, and that all faithful individuals have the same thoughts which is obviously not the case. Thus, Shirley’s translation preserves the paradoxical singularity of faith with which we are here concerned. However, Dr. Willi Goetschel has indicated to me a problem in Shirley’s translation. Spinoza’s original Latin does not include “our fundamental principle” (as Shirley has it), Spinoza instead writes about “the foundation provided here” [dato fundamento] referring not necessarily to a foundational principle but to the reasons that lead up to this point. Dr. Goetschel generously translates Spinoza’s original Latin definition of faith (“*nempe quod nihil aliud sit quam de Deo talia sentire, quibus ignoratis tollitur erga Deum obedientia et hac obedientia posita necessaria pñuntur*”) as: faith is nothing else than to think, hold true, comprehend [sentire] about God those things [talia] without whose knowledge [quibus ignoratis] the obedience to God would abolished/removed along with what necessarily follows from this obedience (personal correspondence, May 2023).

³⁹² TPT14.21.

³⁹³ TPT15.44.

teach us that obedience to and trust in God suffices for the blessedness of human freedom, and it does not require that the beliefs that are most conducive to this trust be conceived as eternal truths of nature. Only love can cause love, only faith can cause faith.

We are thus left only with the problem of homogenization. For, if individuals are free to interpret the documents of their faith for themselves according to the principles of their belief, how can there be a universal standard with which to recognize and evaluate the good faith of others without simply imposing our own imagination? But we have already covered the solution to this problem because the interpretation of faith is not really any different from the interpretation of words, except that faith is conceived through itself and words are not. Spinoza has shown that nothing is sacred or profane except in its relation to a mind. Therefore, a faith is sacred or profane only through the use in which it affects or modifies the mind of the believer. Just as there is no word, institution, or ritual that cannot fall into neglect and malicious abuse, including the words, institutions, ceremonies, and even Scripture itself, so too there is no belief that suffices as sacred by simple virtue of what is believed. Sheer belief is not “saving by itself, but only in relation to obedience. Or as James says (James 2:17), faith by itself, without works, is dead.”³⁹⁴ Therefore, in the same way that words have no meaning outside of the various ways in which they are used, so also the interpretation of a faith has no life or spirit if it inspires no works of love. The universal standard by which we interpret both the words and faith of others, therefore, is nothing but their works, in other words, *what they do*. “So we must not for a moment believe that opinions, considered in themselves and without regard to works, have any piety or impiety in them. Instead we should say that a person believes something piously only

³⁹⁴ TPT14.14.

insofar as his opinions move him to obedience, and impiously only insofar as he takes a license from them to sin or rebel.”³⁹⁵

If opinions and beliefs are not saving on their own, then by what standard do we interpret practical works and uses of a faith to be charitable? If there is no external arbiter who deems an act charitable by virtue of their infallible judgement, and if an act is not charitable simply because someone believes it to be so, then what does Spinoza consider to be the standard of a charitable work? The divine law dictates only that we desire nothing for others that we do not desire for ourselves, but the desires of individuals are prone to conflict. Does the law mean that I must desire for you exactly what I desire for myself? What if, in being overwhelmed by external passions, I succumb to depression and begin to hate myself? Would I then have to hate my neighbour too? Or, what if I lusted after my neighbour, would I then have to lust after myself like Narcissus? Clearly, this is not a love of neighbour as oneself but its reversal – it is a love of oneself as one’s neighbour. The difference then, according to Spinoza’s concept of faith, is that the faithful do not simply impose the final-ends of their appetites and subordinate others to the pursuit, on the contrary the faithful recognize that their personal good does not exist without the reciprocal good of the other (neighbour). The standard according to which Spinoza thinks we should judge the works of a faith, therefore, is simply the effort with which it strives to correct, improve, and perfect its inevitable imperfections.

Even though the divine law has reached us uncorrupted, whole and complete, our obedience to God is never fulfilled in its totality by given facts of belief or practice but only in the striving to perfect those beliefs and practices. Hence, what really matters in our obedience to

³⁹⁵ TPT13.29.

God, and so equally what matters to the desire to be the adequate cause of our actions, is not the nervous purity that punishes and scolds our inevitable failures to love others in the way they desire to be loved, but in the striving by which we identify and correct those failures. The golden-rule, therefore, does not reduce the self to the neighbour or the neighbour to the self, but enters the two into a paradoxically singular relationship in which each one becomes who they are through their relation to the other. It is only in accommodating our works to the affective powers of others that we can begin to understand what our affects do and appropriate them productively into a faithful practice that constitutes the blessedness of our freedom both as individuals and collectives. For, it is only in knowing what our affects do (to ourselves and others) that we can know what they are, and thus what powers we have over and through them.

We thus confront the paradox of singularity as it expressed by Spinoza's concept of faith and true religion. On the one hand, true religion necessarily presupposes a monotheistic foundation for Spinoza because if a faith is adequately pious it must be conceived as the cause of itself and therefore as its own standard. This is why Spinoza insists that there is only "one" God, "one" substance, and "one" standard of truth. But, on the other hand, we can see that Spinoza's idea of monotheism paradoxically involves a kind of religious pluralism which is expressed by the infinite diversity of adequate religious interpretations. For, if the intuitive moral certainty of Scripture is based on the very doctrine that it claims to reveal to the world – namely the doctrine of universal love of neighbour (*caritas*) – then to interpret Scripture from itself alone really means to interpret Scripture as it relates to the individual human mind since God's text is not written on any scroll but the mind itself. However, to interpret Scripture in relation to the mind alone does not mean that individuals subject their interpretation of Scripture to the passive affects of our whims and fancies. It means to interpret both Scripture and the thinking self in

light of what is necessarily adequate, divine, and substantial in both. Thus, even though the narratives of Biblical prophecies refer to the singular history of particular peoples, these stories are ultimately also the stories of the blessed salvation and transitional perfections of its faithful reader – *any* faithful reader. The divinity of Scripture reflects the divinity of the reader because it tells their story, regardless of who they are, as it relates the paradox of sinful, rational, and faithful human beings as they struggle and strive to constitute the community for which and in which their singularity is expressed and realized.

With the paradoxical pluralism of Spinoza’s ideal of monotheistic faith we can now understand in what way reason is subject to faith in an equally reciprocal manner as faith is subject to reason. We have seen Spinoza acknowledge that the moral certainty of Scripture cannot be deduced by reason from prior principles. In this way, revelation was and remains necessary in the sense that there is no external principle from which its truth can be deduced other than revelation itself. Reason cannot perceive on its own the paradox that simple obedience is a necessary path to freedom and emancipation. Since the truth of a revelation cannot be “proven” according to a logic of non-contradiction and is only expressed in its “works” from which its sacredness is inextricable, there is no reasonable argument or proposition that can serve as the standard of a faith. On the contrary, all reasonable argumentation, insofar as it is reasonable, presupposes a good faith in which the truth of that argument is conceived as its own standard and from which all have a share in its necessity. It is precisely due to the inseparability between the sacredness of a faith and its works that we are guaranteed of the incorruptible essence of the divine law of charity (*caritas*). If the doctrine of universal love could be falsified or so corrupted that its practical expressions were indistinguishable from error, we would have no basis with which to recognize that error. As such, error and sin would be reduced to ignorance

of the true and the good. We would be reverted and reduced to the contradictory Socratic opposition of thought and existence, of ourselves and others. But since the meaning of words, especially those of a moral doctrine, are determined only by their use, and since nobody can be so deceived that they confuse their own sadness for joy, or hatred for love, it is inconceivable that the divine law could be corrupted without that malice being immediately exposed and corrected. Reason is therefore subject to faith in the sense that no one can, in good faith, argue or reason their way out of their moral responsibility to others.

Faith has no need for philosophical truths because it is concerned only with an *obedience* to principles that maximize our power to act from our adequate nature. But obedience rooted in one's own desires ceases to be obedience. If the divine law is simultaneously within us and without us, and if we have the power to desire this law from our own nature, it makes no sense to say that we obey what we ourselves have dictated. Obedience as such ceases to be obedience to an external authority and sublimates into a kind of self-determination that reflects the *causa-sui* of God. Therefore Spinoza's concept of divine revelation as presented in the TPT is identical with the formulation of the ontological argument for the necessary existence of God posited in the *Ethics* that truth is its own standard. For, when obedience to the divine law becomes an intellectual love of God through the practical love of others, it is clear that faith and reason share an identical content. But despite this identity, we must nonetheless distinguish and separate their "domains" since devotion cannot arise from argumentation, and faith cannot dictate the conditions of its inspiration. However, the paradox is that we must nonetheless relate the two in an interconnected reciprocity because neither can be conceived without the other. No one can "prove" their love in the same way that philosophical reason can prove the two sides of a triangle are necessarily equivalent to two right angles, and a true faith in the self-multiplying powers of

love can only be practiced and perfected in the reasoned cooperation with others. Reason, thus, is not associated with armchair speculation or the abstract deductions of the philosopher king in their ivory tower. What counts as knowledge, for Spinoza, is not what is printed and reprinted in books and then parroted by orators. What we typically call “knowledge” is nothing but the process by which our interpretations of God, ourselves, and others is continuously and indefinitely honed and perfected. Contrary to Greek teleology, Spinoza demonstrates that the principle through which human beings strive to perfect themselves is predicated on nothing but the intuitive presence of what is adequately substantial and real in their nature. Thus, the striving efforts of a faith have no terminus, no ultimate resting place whose long-awaited sanctuary would finally bestow upon it the essence it desired but lacked precisely because the nature of the mind has its end in-itself, not in-another. The paradox is that the mind is always already perfect, lacking nothing of its essential nature, and yet it is still to be perfected.³⁹⁶

In conclusion, we have discovered the paradoxical singularity through which Spinoza relates reason and faith. The expression of this adequacy, however, is not historically guaranteed but depends on the communicational powers of a community to construct an adequate idea of itself, that is, an idea of itself that accounts for the dynamic conditions in which that idea is produced. We have seen that faith without reason is self-erasing because the self-abnegation of blind faith employs reason against itself in the contradictory attempt to use reason to disavow reason. Equally, however, since reason without faith is inevitably partial, the partiality of its

³⁹⁶ A general trend displayed by post-structuralist authors like Deleuze, Negri, Balibar, Sharp, etc., is to connect Spinoza’s refusal of final-causes to his theory of desire and the concept of subjectivity that it involves. We shall see in the next chapter that Spinoza’s theory of subjectivity is predicated on a dissolution of the central Cartesian notion of an *ego* or self as a willfully rational subject. We shall see that for Spinoza, there is no *I* who thinks and therefore *is*, as is the case for Descartes. Rather, for Spinoza humans *are* simply because they think. “Man thinks [NS: or, to put it differently, we know that we think.]” EIIA2. Though post-structuralist authors are right to emphasize this difference, they tend to obfuscate the otherwise strongly Cartesian elements that remain in Spinoza and inform much of his thinking.

ideas is invariably compensated by biases and prejudices that render its conclusions permanently incomplete. So, rather than opposing one to the other as so many philosophers and theologians had done before (and after) him, Spinoza conceived reason and faith to form a unified and cohesive whole in human nature that is expressed through the actual practices of individual people. This is why I argued that Spinoza's "proofs" for the necessary existence of God cannot be reduced to either a priori definitions or a posteriori demonstration that might be hypothetically true without the desire and practical work of interpreting individuals. On the contrary, these "proofs" depend only on the immanence and reciprocity in which adequate ideas are conceived and practiced. Philosophical reason and theological faith must be separated since neither can legitimately determine the content of the other. Yet, this separation cannot be conceived through opposition without a mutual erasure of their moral and intellectual content. Therefore, the separation between philosophical reason and theological faith must involve a relation in which they remain distinct and autonomous but are nonetheless unified in and by the practical efforts of a human mind. Only in this way can individuals be conceived as capable of adequate reasons that justify their faith and charitable works that realize the universal compatibility of their reason. The paradox, then, is that neither reason nor faith can be adequately conceived as opposed standards of moral or ontological truth. Reason and faith must be understood to be united as divergent expressions of the same thing, which for Spinoza is the idea of God. This idea expresses the paradox of singularity because it is at once the idea of an infinite or unlimited God (whole) *and* the idea of finite/limited human beings (part) who necessarily possess this infinite idea and realize it in their particular efforts. Despite their fundamental differences, these two ideas – the idea of God and the human being – occur together in a single idea that cannot be conceived through binary opposition.

Chapter Four

The Monolith and the Manifold

The paradox that I explore in this fourth chapter is not fundamentally different from the conceptual structures previously encountered. In all its variations and modifications, the paradox of singularity consistently expresses the irreducible unity of seemingly opposed ideas. In the previous two chapters, I argued through Spinoza that there is no *adequate* concept of God that can be conceived without the idea of an individual human being and that, therefore, these ideas must relate through a logic of paradoxical unity rather than contradictory opposition. This chapter, however, explores the paradox of singularity not through the relation between the ideas of God and human beings, but rather through the simultaneity in which individual things cohere within various orders of complex multiplicity while at the same time retaining an essential singularity that defines them. My focus here less so on the paradox of Spinoza's ontological argument for the necessary existence of God, and more so on the paradoxical foundations of Spinoza's ontological system. In other words, I will explore the paradoxical relationship between Spinoza's concept of substance, attribute, and mode. The paradox is that the absolute singularity of substance expresses an infinity of attribution that itself involves an endless multiplicity of finite things. The paradox then is that the monolith expresses a manifold, but equally, the manifold involves a monolith.

In the first section of this chapter, I consider the unity of Spinoza's metaphysical concept of an absolute substance with the infinite multiplicity of its attributes. I ask, how does Spinoza's paradoxical logic relate and identify the idea of an absolutely singular substance with the idea of an infinite multiplicity of attribution? Can this logic be accurately described, as it was by Spinoza's earliest critics, as a recapitulation of Eleatic and Parmenidean monism? In the second

section I ask what for Spinoza constitutes “individuals” (*individua*) and singular things (*res singulares*) given the vast interconnectedness and interdependence in which he conceives existing things or “modes” in general? If an individual cannot subsist outside of the relations in which it is determined, as Spinoza consistently argues, then how can Spinoza maintain a strong theory of individuality without reducing individuals to the relations of which they are a part? The third section argues that, despite the determinism that Spinoza’s ontology clearly involves, Spinoza’s critique of freewill is fundamentally rooted in the affirmation of human freedom in the transition to an ever-greater (or lesser) perfection of individual nature. I argue that the impossibility of a freewill does not preclude the possibility of freedom itself. In conclusion, I will show that Spinoza’s theory of singularity and individuality, human or otherwise, is conceived as a unique capacity for action that can be realized only within a collective context.

a. ~~One~~ Substance with an Infinity of Attributes

Spinoza’s earliest opponents tended to accuse him of an atheism that conflated God with Nature and religion with superstition.³⁹⁷ I have aimed to show in the previous chapters that these criticisms misunderstand Spinoza’s ontology since it is only on the basis that “whatever is, is

³⁹⁷ See, for example, *Letter 42* from Lambert de Velthuysen to Jacob Ostens: “[1] You ask me to tell you my opinion, give you my judgment, of the book titled *Theological-Political Discourse*. I’ve decided to do that now . . . However, I won’t go into detail, but will just try to give a brief account of the author’s meaning and intention concerning religion . . . [2] Mersenne once published a Treatise against the Deists which I recall having read. But I think hardly any of the Deists has written on behalf of that wicked cause as maliciously, as skillfully and as cunningly as the author of this dissertation has. Furthermore, unless I miss my guess, this man does not stay within the bounds of the Deists and leaves men an even narrower scope for worship. [3] He recognizes God and declares that he is the maker and founder of the Universe. But he maintains that the form, appearance and order of the world are completely necessary, as necessary as the nature of God and the eternal truths, which he maintains have been established outside God’s will. So he also says plainly that everything happens by unconquerable necessity and inevitable fate . . . [4] He does this consistently with his principles: what room can there be for a last judgment, or what expectation of reward or punishment, when everything is ascribed to fate and it’s maintained that all things emanate from God by an inevitable necessity – or rather, when one maintains that this whole universe is God?” L42.

either in itself or in another”³⁹⁸ that a distinction can be made between God and Nature, or religion and superstition in the first place. Superstitious fatalisms thus follow from the *inability* to make this distinction, not from its affirmation. We shall now see, however, that Spinoza’s later critics changed the focus of their complaints to the more nuanced but equally false charge. These later critics argue that what Spinoza denies is not the reality of God and religion, but that he denies the reality of “the world” in a way some considered reminiscent of the Parmenidean Eleatics. What these later critics tend to share in common is a misunderstanding of the relation that defines Spinoza’s concept of substance and attribute coupled with a concern for the apparently absurd consequences that follow from their interpretation of this relation. Although, in my judgement, none of these criticisms succeed in establishing their point, it is nonetheless worth exploring some of them for two main reasons. Firstly, because refuting these criticisms will help us solidify our own understanding of the relation between substance and attribute. Secondly, because in doing so we will emphasize the importance of interpreting Spinoza’s philosophy through a notion of paradoxical singularity which these critics lack. My first aim in this section is to set up the shared perspective of Spinoza’s critics that accuse him of having conceived a contradictory world. After I introduce this common criticism, I will focus on Hegel’s arguments since these have had a lasting effect in the scholarship. In conclusion, I will show that Hegel’s critique fails because he does not grasp the paradox of a singular substance with an infinity of attributes.

Pierre Bayle was one of the earliest critics to charge Spinoza with the absurdity of a contradictory world. Bayle and others would accuse Spinoza of having renewed the basic principles of Eleatic monism in a way that reduces all “real” diversity in the world to the all-

³⁹⁸ EIA1.

encompassing Oneness of substance. According to Bayle, if God or substance is the one real subject and object of all true propositions then indeed absurd consequences seem to follow.

. . . were it true, as Spinoza will have it, that men are modifications of God, we should speak falsely should we say, Peter denies this, he wills that, he affirms such a thing; for, according to that system, it is properly God who denies, who wills, who affirms, and consequently all the denominations resulting from the thoughts of all men, do properly and physically belong to the substance of God.³⁹⁹

The problem thus for Bayle is that if God or substance is the one object and subject of all possible logical predication then absurdities and contradictions follow in which we will have to affirm and deny the same properties at the same time. God, as such, would have to be conceived as both, for example, omnipotent and powerless, or omniscient and ignorant. According to Bayle, Spinoza would neither have us understand that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, nor that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, but rather that God crossed God and that God defeated God.

And therefore all the phrases made use of to express what men do one against another have no other true sense than this: God hates himself; he asks favors of himself, and he refuses them to himself; he persecutes himself, kills himself, eats himself, calumniates himself, executes himself . . .⁴⁰⁰

Bayle was not alone in this reading of Spinoza. Leibniz also understood Spinoza's philosophy as a simple revival of ancient monism that denied the reality of change and which inevitably led to atheism. Leibniz, for example, insisted that to posit that "all things are only

³⁹⁹ Pierre Bayle, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary, P–W*, vol. 3, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary, Selected and Abridged from the Great Work of Peter Bayle, With a Life of Bayle, In four Vols* (1826; reis. Charlottesville, Virginia: Past Masters' Commons, IntelLex Corporation, 2019), 296.

⁴⁰⁰ Bayle, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary, P–W*, 298–99.

some evanescent or flowing modifications and phantasms, so to speak, of the one permanent divine substance” is to unscrupulously affirm “that doctrine of most evil repute, which a certain subtle and profane writer recently introduced into the world, or revived – that the very nature or substance of all things is God.”⁴⁰¹ Although the context of this passage is actually written against Malebranche, it is easy to infer that the reputedly “subtle and profane writer” to whom Leibniz alludes is Spinoza. This conflation of Spinoza with Parmedian Eleatics remained a common way to read Spinoza for a long time, even with the emergence of German Idealism nearly a century later. Schopenhauer, for example, claimed that “Spinoza was a mere reviver of the Eleatics” and Hegel, otherwise a philosophical enemy of Schopenhauer’s, shared this view.⁴⁰²

Hegel wrote:

Taken as a whole this constitutes the Idea of Spinoza, and it is just what was ‘*tò ón*’ to the Eleatics . . . Spinoza is far from having proved this unity as convincingly as was done by the ancients; but what constitutes the grandeur of Spinoza’s manner of thought is that he is able to renounce all that is determinate and particular, and restrict himself to the One, giving heed to this alone.⁴⁰³

Hence, even philosophers as diverse as Hegel and Schopenhauer still tended to read Spinoza as an Eleatic. The popularity of this reading changed the focus of Spinoza criticism from charges of atheism to the opposing charge of theomania. Spinoza’s pariah status within the European

⁴⁰¹ G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. Leroy E. Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 502.

⁴⁰² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 71, 76–77.

⁴⁰³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Medieval and Modern Philosophy, In Three Volumes*, trans. E.S. Haldane and F.H. Simson, vol. 3 (1896; reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 257–58.

history of philosophy was thus transformed from a radical atheist into an obsessive zealot who denied the reality of anything that was not God.

Spinozism itself as such, and Oriental pantheism, too, comprise the view that the divine in all things is only the universal aspect of their content . . . The usual representation of pantheism derives from . . . forgetting that – in a religious representation in which only the substance or the One has the value of genuine actuality – individual things, in this very contrast with the One, have disappeared and no actuality is ascribed to them.⁴⁰⁴

Thus, for Hegel the problem with Spinoza is not that his ideas subject God to determinations, but that it makes God the subject of all determination such that individual things have no independent status. That is, the problem for Hegel is that the absolute diffusion of substance absorbs all individuality into itself such that individual things are not actually independent and cannot exist on their own. As a result, Spinozism offers only what Hegel would describe as a pure universal with no particular content and is therefore completely empty.

We can see in Hegel's criticisms a change in strategy that later philosophers would adopt to refute Spinozism. Although Spinoza's earliest critics took issue with the untraditional representation of God and the apparent embrace of natural determination, with German Idealists like Hegel the problem became that there was too much God and not enough individual nature. The popularity of this inverted criticism would reach its height with Novalis who would famously describe Spinoza as a "God intoxicated man."⁴⁰⁵ Salomon Maimon would later coin the

⁴⁰⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, One-volume Edition, The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, & J. M. Stewart with the assistance of H.S. Harris (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 123–24.

⁴⁰⁵ Novalis, *Novalis Schriften*, ed. Richard Samuel, Hans Joachim Mähl, & Gertrud Schulz, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–88), 651, quoted in Yitzhak Melamed, "Acosmism or Weak Individuals? Hegel, Spinoza, and the Reality of the Finite," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48, no. 1 (2010): 80.

term “acosmism” to describe this reading of Spinoza’s philosophy. The point of this term for Maimon was to signal that Spinoza rejected not the reality of God, as earlier commentators had argued, but rather the reality of finite modes or individual things.

It is inconceivable how one could turn the Spinozistic system into atheism since these two systems are the exact opposites of each other. Atheism denies the existence of God, Spinozism denies the existence of the world. Rather, Spinozism should be called ‘acosmism.’⁴⁰⁶

Hegel and Maimon thus shared similar readings of Spinoza, both interpreting his arguments to mean that only the formal unity of substance or God is real and actual whereas diversity and particularity are merely intellectual fictions. Although Hegel did not tend to use the term “acosmism,” it is clear that the term can equally describe his reading. “Spinoza maintains that there is no such thing as what is known as the world; it is merely a form of God, and in and for itself it is nothing.”⁴⁰⁷ From this common reading, Hegel and Maimon argued that Spinoza lacked a philosophical concept of difference and diversification and therefore Spinozism could not offer contemporary thought a strong theory of individuality or subjectivity. But since Hegel’s reading and philosophy has had a greater influence on 20th century interpretations of Spinoza, in what follows I will focus on Hegel’s criticisms.

One of Hegel’s main strategies of critique was to argue that Spinoza’s distinction between substance and its attributes existed only in and for the subjective human intellect.

⁴⁰⁶ Salomon Maimon, *Maimons Lebensgeschichte*, ed. Zwi Batscha (1792–93; reis. Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1984), 217, quoted in Yitzhak Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals? Hegel, Spinoza, and the Reality of the Finite,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48, no. 1 (2010): 80. This is Melamed’s translation of the original: “Es ist unbegreiflich, wie man das spinozistische System zum atheistischen machen konnte, da sie doch einander gerade entgegengesetzt sind. In diesem wird das Dasein Gottes, in jenem aber das Dasein der Welt gezeugnet. Es müßte also eher das akosmische System heißen.”

⁴⁰⁷ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 281.

Spinoza's definition of the absolute is followed by his definition of the attribute, and this is determined as the manner in which intellect comprehends the essence of substance.

Apart from the fact the intellect, in accordance with its nature, is postulated as posterior to attribute – for Spinoza defined it as mode – attribute, determination as determination of the absolute, is thus made *dependent on an other*, namely, intellect, which appears as external and immediate over against substance.⁴⁰⁸

In Hegel's reading, the diversity of individuality (and of modifications in general) is simply a fiction superimposed by the mind (intellect) on the otherwise undifferentiated stuff that constitutes what we call the "world." The infinite pluralities that describe the attributes and modes then, according to Hegel's reading, apply only to a merely human way of conceiving the absolute but do not adequately describe substance as it is in-itself. For this reason, he argues that Spinoza reduces the idea of individual modes to falsity and illusion. "In Spinozism it is precisely the mode as such which is untrue; substance alone is true and to it everything must be brought back. But this is only to submerge all content in the void, in a merely formal unity lacking all content."⁴⁰⁹ So to what extent then is Hegel's reading of Spinoza's ideas on singularity and individuality accurate? Are modes really illusory fictions of the intellect for Spinoza?

One on the hand, it is very easy to deny the charge of an Eleatic element of an unchanging and unmoved reality in Spinoza's thinking. Spinoza clearly affirms the reality of motion and change when arguing against Zeno's "sophisms" on the illusion of movement. To summarize his argument against Zeno, Spinoza uses the famous illustration of a wheel with three marked points. Zeno would have us conceive this wheel to spin so fast that it reaches infinite

⁴⁰⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V Miller (1969; reis. London: Routledge, 2002), 537.

⁴⁰⁹ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 328.

speeds in which all three points simultaneously occupy the same space at the same time, therefore violating the principle of non-contradiction.

[Zeno] supposes, first, that bodies can be conceived to move so quickly that they cannot move more quickly, and second, that time is composed of moments, just as others have conceived that quantity is composed of indivisible points. Both assumptions are false. For we can never conceive a motion so fast that we do not at the same time conceive a faster one . . . The same is true of slowness. The concept of a motion so slow that there cannot be a slower one also implies a contradiction. We maintain the same thing about time, which is the measure of motion, viz. that our intellect clearly finds a contradiction in conceiving a time so short that there cannot be a shorter one.⁴¹⁰

Spinoza thus clearly affirms the reality of change as it relates to the motions and determinations of bodies in nature. Furthermore, the fact that so much of Spinoza's thinking strives for a transition *away* from our bondage to inadequate ideas and *towards* an ever-greater perfection of our intuitive nature clearly indicates the fundamental role of change and transition in his philosophy.⁴¹¹ The accusation that Spinoza denies the reality of change is simply wrong. The acosmist charge, on the other hand, requires a more nuanced defense. For, there is a sense in which Spinoza insists that substance is identical with the infinite plurality of its attributes and that it therefore cannot be enumerated as "one" except from the fictional perspective of human reason. Furthermore, Spinoza does describe both the existence and the essence of modes to follow and therefore to be in some way *derived* from the existence and essence of substance.

⁴¹⁰ PDPIIP6schol.

⁴¹¹ "...the mind can undergo great changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection." EIIP11schol.

How then can we defend the actual diversity of the attributes and modes insofar as they designate real beings that cannot be reduced to mere intellectual fictions?

Hegel's objection seems to expose a serious problem in Spinoza's definition of the attributes because it threatens to undermine the immanence so essential to Spinoza's system.⁴¹² The lynchpin of Hegel's argument is the accusation that for Spinoza the human "intellect, in accordance with its nature, is postulated as posterior to attribute."⁴¹³ The problem here is that if the accusation is true then it would mean that Spinoza conceives and defines substance from a position external to it. This is a problem because if the idea of substantial attributes is based only on what the intellect *perceives* of substance, as if judging the temperature of a pool by merely looking at it, then it would follow that our intellectual power of conceiving and understanding substance would be limited to only its formal representations. Accordingly, our idea of substance or the Absolute would be like an image external to its object such that the formal conditions of its representation were permanently cut off from its actual content, thereby leaving its true idea incomplete or, in Spinoza's terminology, inadequate and confused.⁴¹⁴ According to Hegel's reading then, the attributes are nothing but ontological perspectives or forms relative to an intellect that represents and reflects the nature of substance outside of itself.

Hegel can thus describe the attributes as intellectual fictions that mutilate the true infinity of substance by extracting from it a single irreducible essence (either Thought *or* Extension). The primary effect of this critique is to make the distinction between attribute and mode relatively weak if not incomprehensible. The secondary effect, however, is to conceal and obscure a

⁴¹² "By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence." EID4.

⁴¹³ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 537.

⁴¹⁴ The ideas of the affections of the body "insofar as they are related only to the human mind [and not to the human body as well], are like conclusions without premises, that is . . . they are confused ideas." EIIIP28dem.

fundamental principle of Spinozism. When Hegel discusses Spinoza's idea of the attributes, he consistently reduces the infinity of substantial attribution that Spinoza otherwise consistently emphasized to a simple duality between Thought and Extension.⁴¹⁵ This is important because this reductionism allows Hegel to conflate Spinozism with its Cartesian roots while also describing the unity of attribute and substance as a unity of oppositional negation that anticipates and elevates the value of Hegel's own philosophy. We will see, however, that for Spinoza the attributes of Thought and Extension do not relate to each other as terms of an opposition that must be overcome. Furthermore, we will see that the individuality and therefore independence of the attributes, which are nonetheless paradoxically identical with the substance whose essence they constitute, can be conceived only insofar as substance is expressed in an infinity of attributes that forbids enumeration.

On its face, Spinoza's definition of the attribute seems to allow for Hegel's reading: "By attribute, I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence."⁴¹⁶ But we must hold Spinoza to the specific language that he uses in this definition because a later definition (EIID3) gives the words "perceive" and "conceive" a very particular meaning. While defining his use of the word "idea" Spinoza writes: "I say concept rather than perception, because the word perception seems to indicate that the mind is acted on by the object. But the concept seems to express an action of the mind."⁴¹⁷ Hence, we should retroactively apply this association of passivity and activity to our reading of the earlier definition of the attributes. If Spinoza had written that attributes are what the intellect *conceives* of a substance as constituting

⁴¹⁵ "Spinoza, like Descartes, accepts only two attributes, thought and extension. The [intellect] grasps them as the [essence] of substance, but . . . [only from the perspective] of the intellect, which falls outside of substance." Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 260.

⁴¹⁶ EID4.

⁴¹⁷ EIID3.

its essence, then we can very well understand why Hegel's criticism might stick. For, defining the attributes through an active conception of the intellect would allow for a reversal of modification in which the "conceived" nature of substance follows from a mode rather than from itself. However, since Spinoza uses the language of "perceive" in the definition of attributes we should understand this relation between substance and modified intellect to be passive – at least in its earliest stages.

For further confirmation of the initial passivity of intellect in relation to the attributes we can consult the letter to Oldenburg in which Spinoza argues against Bacon's view of intellection.

[Bacon] supposes that in addition to the deceptiveness of the senses, the human intellect is deceived simply by its own nature, and feigns everything from the analogy of its own nature, not from the analogy of the universe, so that in relation to the rays of things it is like an uneven mirror, which mixes its own nature with the nature of things, etc.⁴¹⁸

To continue Spinoza's metaphor of an uneven mirror, we can deny Hegel's interpretation that the intellect somehow informs the content of attributional forms by imposing its own nature on its representations. Rather, for Spinoza, the intellect is very much united with the universe in which it exists as an expression thereof and therefore involves nothing foreign or alien to the natural universe in which it inheres. In other words, if the intellect perceives substances as if through a mirror, "it must be a perfectly objective mirror, which 'perceives' substance, such as it is, in the essences that actually constitute it. The definition that Spinoza gives the attributes clearly excludes any creativity on the part of the intellect."⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁸ *Letter 2, to Oldenburg.*

⁴¹⁹ Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 87.

So, if the modified intellect does not engender the attributes of substance but rather perceives both itself and substance through them, then how should we understand the relation between substance and attribute? How can we understand the concepts of substance and attribute to be distinct while also remaining identical? Pierre Macherey's *Hegel or Spinoza* offers great insights into this question, but Macherey's reading still involves what I consider to be a problem. Like many French scholars writing on Spinoza, Macherey relies too heavily on Guérout's constructivist or genetic reading of the first fifteen propositions of the *Ethics* to explain the relation between substance and attribute.⁴²⁰ "Thus, to return to Guérout's expression, the substance is itself 'constructed' through the elements that compose it, that is to say the attributes, themselves, insofar as they constitute substance."⁴²¹ The benefit of this constructivist interpretation, according to Macherey, is that it appears to express the *causa-sui* of substance in a way that overcomes Hegel's reductionism. Contrary to Hegel's reading that reduces substance to an immediate and originally hierarchic foundation, Guérout's constructivist reading argues that *causa-sui* is the process in which substance deduces the infinity of its attribution from itself. The attributes then are the particular kinds of determination in which the absolute infinity of substance is expressed as particular infinities that remain infinite only in their kind or nature. "By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence."⁴²² Guérout and Macherey describe this process of attribution as *genetic*, *synthetic*, or *geometric* "because it determines its object necessarily by producing it. If he is *causa sui*, he is not without cause, God

⁴²⁰ Macherey seems to be aware that Guérout's analysis is "inadmissible on certain points" but otherwise affirms what I find most problematic in Guérout's reading, namely that the genetic processes of self "deduction" describes, for Guérout, the *causa-sui* in which substance engenders itself through the attributes.

⁴²¹ Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 90.

⁴²² EID6.

is on the contrary absolutely determined by himself; the attributes are precisely the forms of this determination.”⁴²³ What I object to, however, is not this definition of *causa-sui*, which I think is quite apt, but rather the description of this ontological process of coming into being as somehow deductive, synthetic, or genetic (geometrical) in nature.⁴²⁴

Admittedly, Spinoza did not make this particularly clear for his readers and, given the revisionary nature of his posthumously published texts, it is possible that he may not have fully grasped this problem himself. For, as we have seen in previous chapters of this study, Spinoza sometimes appears to convey the deductive/geometrical aspects of reason as the pinnacle and most valuable form of thought. Yet, it is not deduction that Spinoza affirms as the truly active power of minds but rather that of understanding itself. “What we strive for from reason is nothing but understanding; nor does the mind, insofar as it uses reason, judge anything else useful to itself except what leads to understanding.”⁴²⁵ Nowhere does Spinoza write that deduction alone or even predominantly leads to understanding, and I have even shown elsewhere in this study that in certain cases the imposition of mathematical reasoning obfuscates rather than establishes understanding.

The primary function of deduction, for Spinoza, is to provide adequate definitions of things. A definition is adequate to the degree to which it expresses the efficient cause(s) of a thing’s nature and existence. “To know which of the many ideas of a thing is sufficient for deducing all its properties, I pay attention to one thing only: that the idea or definition of the

⁴²³ Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 91.

⁴²⁴ “Thus, engendered in its attributes, which are its internal efficient cause, substance is also cause of itself; it is clear from then on that the substance is not an immediate absolute, because it must be deduced, even if from itself.” Ibid.

⁴²⁵ EIVP26.

thing expresses the efficient cause.”⁴²⁶ If we have a knowledge of the efficient cause(s) by which a thing exists, Spinoza thinks that we should be able to deduce all the properties that relate to and follow from the nature of the thing. For “from certain properties of a thing (whatever idea is given) some things can be discovered more easily, others with greater difficulty – though they all concern the Nature of the thing.”⁴²⁷ We can infer from this that the point of deduction, for Spinoza, is to establish as wide an array of relations and properties as possible, all of which follow from and are limited by the nature of the thing defined. Deduction is therefore not the means by which we ontologically conceive the idea of substance since this follows only from the nature or essence of the mind whose efficient cause is obviously not deduction. No human mind has ever deduced itself into existence. Deduction is simply that power by which we synthetically elaborate and connect the idea of things that we already possess to other ideas.

Spinoza writes: “when I define God as a supremely perfect Being, since that definition doesn’t express the efficient cause (for I understand the efficient cause to be both internal and external), I won’t be able to derive all God’s properties from it. But when I define God to be a *Being [absolutely infinite]*, etc. (see EID6), [I can derive all God’s properties from it.]”⁴²⁸ But we must not take Spinoza to mean that he has arrived at the idea of God deductively. We should understand only that deduction is necessary to establish adequate definitions with which we can connect and elaborate the properties of things to an adequately intuited idea.⁴²⁹ Deduction is thus

⁴²⁶ *Letter 60*, to Tschirnhaus.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.* Brackets added by Curley.

⁴²⁹ Deleuze discovers this inadequacy of definition to constitute the difference between Spinoza’s notion of *attributes* and *propria* (properties): “Attributes are Words expressing unlimited qualities . . . Spinoza is able on this basis to distinguish attributes and *propria* . . . a *proprium* is what belongs to a thing, but can never explain what it is. Thus the *propria* of God are just “adjectives” which give us no substantial knowledge; God would not be God without them, but is not God through them . . . Omniscient, omnipresent, are *propria* predicated of a particular

certainly a property of intellection, but it is neither its essence nor its efficient cause. Therefore, the human mind knows neither itself nor God through deductive operations.

The reason why the ontological function and intellectual status of deduction matters is because there can be no construction or finite passage to the absolute and infinite. There is no conceivable process in which finite summations can amount to an infinity that prohibits all enumeration. We are thus confronted with the alternative that either we have always already begun with an idea of God – regardless of how confused that idea may be in its infancy – or we have never begun to know anything at all. But if we had never begun to know anything at all then we would not be able to inquire into our own ignorance for the simple reason that we would never know that we were ignorant in the first place. Therefore, because we know that we can interrogate false ideas through the necessary truth that belongs to adequate ideas, we can also know that the idea of God is not the final-end of an infinitely long chain of deductions but is itself the immanent foundation of our knowledge and freedom. Therefore, Spinoza’s concept of substance is qualified in and determined by its attributes not because they are the deductive consequences of an original premise but because they are the efficient cause(s) through which substance conceives and determines itself. Thus, we cannot say that the existence of substance is in any way deduced or derived from an infinite sum of *relatively* infinite attributes that if arbitrarily taken together construct the infinity of substance. That would mean that the attributes were prior in nature and existence to the thing that they are attributed to, and that is absurd.

attribute (Thought, Extension).” Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 49–50. See also chapter seven of the first part of Spinoza’s *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being* distinguish between propria and attribute. Terms like *omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, simple, infinite, etc.* do not “give us here any Attributes through which it is known what the thing (God) is, but only *Propria*, which indeed belong to a thing, but never explain what it is. For thought existing of itself, being the cause of all things, the greatest good, eternal, and immutable, etc., are proper to God alone, nevertheless through those *propria* we can know neither what the being to which these *propria* belong is, nor what attributes it has.” ST I.vii.vi.

Contrary to Guérout's constructive approach, I argue that we should understand the self-causing powers of substantial existence to be a matter of ontological "transition" (*transitio*), not deduction. For, insofar as human beings have an immanent and adequate idea of God, then the human and divine expression of *causa-sui* are identical in nature. And since Spinoza insists that the freedom of human nature consists in its transition to greater perfection, this idea of freedom as transitional must be retroactively applied to the determinative nature of substance as *causa-sui*. But since God is always already maximally perfect and maximally self-determined, there is nothing outside of substance from which it can be rendered partial and imperfect. Therefore, the transition involved in God's *causa-sui* is not from more to less perfection or from less to more as it is for human beings but instead the transition is from the absolutely perfect (whole) to the absolutely perfect. These perfect wholes into which substance transitions are nothing but the attributes themselves insofar as we conceive the existence of some given mode to transition from this attribute, now to that attribute.

Contrary to Hegel's interpretation in which substance externalizes itself first in its attributes and then in its modes, it is clear now that Spinoza prohibits all externality and transcendence in the relation between substance and attribute.⁴³⁰ The attributes inhere in substance in such a way that they exist as particular expressions of an infinite essence that is identical to and yet distinct from every expression that it articulates. There is thus an essential but nonetheless paradoxical identity between substance and attribute that simultaneously prohibits all enumeration, externalization, and hierarchical subordination since neither substance nor attribute can be conceived before, after, above or below the other. Attributes are substantial since they are ontologically identical with substance and so are not merely reflected forms that

⁴³⁰ "God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things." EIP18.

lack a concrete existence of their own. Attributes are fully expressed realities of their own kind that all cohere together in the absolute idea of substance. Yet, attributes are also distinct from substance because they do not present it in its absolutely infinite totality but only in an infinity relative to the kind of attribute it is (a limitless power of extension, a limitless power of thought, etc.).

Spinoza speaks to the nature of this paradoxical identity in *Letter 9* to Simon de Vries. He begins by paraphrasing the definition of attribute in the *Ethics*: “By substance I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that whose conception does not involve the conception of another thing. I understand the same by attribute, except that attribute is so called in respect to the intellect, which attributes to substance a certain specific kind of nature.”⁴³¹ But De Vries does not understand how a being can simultaneously be identified with more than one attribute, but Spinoza reminds de Vries of the reasons for this paradoxical identity.

I advanced two proofs, the first of which is as follows: It is clear beyond all doubt that every entity is conceived by us under some attribute, and the more reality or being an entity has, the more attributes are to be attribute to it. Hence, an absolutely infinite entity must be defined . . . and so on. A second proof – and this proof I take to be decisive – states that the more attributes I attribute to an entity, the more existence I am bound to attribute to it; that is, the more I conceive it as truly existent. The exact contrary would be the case if I had imagined a chimera or something of the sort.⁴³²

⁴³¹ *Letter 9*, to Simon de Vries.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

This imagined chimera is the exact contrary of necessary attribution because its existence is excluded by the negations that would constitute it as something self-canceling.⁴³³ Spinoza illustrates this with the chimera of a square-circle whose own definition would self-evidently express its unreality.⁴³⁴ Assuming, however, that these definitions would not suffice for de Vries, Spinoza again offered another example: “First, by ‘Israel’ I mean the third patriarch: by ‘Jacob’ I mean that same person, the latter name being given to him because he seized his brother’s heel. Secondly, by a ‘plane surface’ I mean one that reflects all rays of light without any change. I mean the same by ‘white surface’, except that it is called white in respect of a man looking at it.”⁴³⁵ So what Spinoza means by more or less existence is simply the degree to which a designation, such as a definition or name, presupposes causes that are either in-itself or in-another. A thing is conceived to possess *more reality/existence* to the degree to which its existence presupposes fewer contingencies that mediate it. A “plane surface” therefore has relatively more objective reality because its concept is not mediated by the idea of human perception through which the idea of “white” otherwise involves. Thus, in the same way that Israel and Jacob or plane surface and white surface all designate the same thing, albeit from the

⁴³³ We should be careful not to confuse Spinoza’s notion of negation and contradiction in passages like these. The non-existence of the chimera does not follow from its violation of a rule of non-contradiction (as if a horn somehow “contradicted” the idea of a horse in the idea of a unicorn). Non-contradiction and non-negation are not interchangeable concepts.

⁴³⁴ “Of everything whatsoever a cause or reason must be assigned, either for its existence, or for its non—existence—e.g. if a triangle exists, a reason or cause must be granted for its existence; if, on the contrary, it does not exist, a cause must also be granted, which prevents it from existing, or annuls its existence. This reason or cause must either be contained in the nature of the thing in question, or be external to it. For instance, the reason for the non—existence of a square circle is indicated in its nature, namely, because it would involve a contradiction. On the other hand, the existence of substance follows also solely from its nature, inasmuch as its nature involves existence. (See Prop. vii.) But the reason for the existence of a triangle or a circle does not follow from the nature of those figures, but from the order of universal nature in extension. From the latter it must follow, either that a triangle necessarily exists, or that it is impossible that it should exist. So much is self—evident. It follows therefrom that a thing necessarily exists, if no cause or reason be granted which prevents its existence” EIP11dem. alt.

⁴³⁵ *Letter 9*, to Simon de Vries.

perspective of different degrees of affection, substance and attribute designate the same idea only from different perspectives. The idea of substance and attribute therefore *transitions* from one and the same idea as different perspectives on the same thing.

Macherey finds an excellent formulation of the paradox of singularity in the *Ethics* as it describes the relation between substance and the attributes. “By God’s attributes are to be understood what expresses (*exprimit*) an essence of the divine substance, that is, what pertains (*pertinet*) to substance. The attributes themselves, I say, must involve (*involvere*) it itself.”⁴³⁶ Without saying so, Macherey shows that we can understand the paradox of singularity by paying special attention to Spinoza’s Latin words: *exprimit* (express), *pertinet* (belongs), *involvere* (involve).⁴³⁷ That is, we must abandon the thesis that takes the attributes to somehow represent substance in its formal reality and instead adopt the thesis that understands the attributes to *express* substance in its infinitely varied reality. Attributes are neither predicates nor nominal designations, they are real expressions of substantial powers. Substance, therefore, cannot be conceived prior to the attributes in which it is expressed, constituted, and realized. In other words, we should abandon Hegel’s thesis that the attributes are external to substance and adopt the thesis that understands them to belong to each other since the attributes follow from the nature of substance and substance is itself constituted by its absolute expression in an infinity of attributes. Substance and attributes do not relate as arbitrary and external derivatives, but rather as inalienable and mutually entailed ideas that, like the idea of the human being and God, cannot be conceived to exist without and external to the other.

⁴³⁶ EIP19dem. Emphasis added.

⁴³⁷ Macherey, 94.

There is, however, still a problem that needs to be resolved. We see now how substance and attribute are united, but how are they also distinct? We can see that the attributes are identical to the substance that they constitute and in which they are expressed, yet the human intellect still seems to impose a separation and independence. And this division of the attributes seems to reinsert an element of fiction into the idea of distinction and ontological diversity that seems to downgrade the status of individuality. If substance and attribute are not distinguished outside the intellect that perceives them, then is the idea of individuality an intellectual fiction such that the “real” is just an undivided aggregate of stuff? If this were the case, then an attribute would be nothing in itself but only a formal representation of the intellect, and Hegel’s criticisms would be well deserved. After all, Spinoza insists that besides “substance and accidents, nothing exists in reality, or externally to the intellect. All that exists, is either conceived through itself or through something else, and its concept either involves or does not involve the concept of another thing.”⁴³⁸ Is this Spinoza’s final position? As we interrogate Spinoza on this point, we should be careful not to reverse the order of inherence. The attributes are not “in” the intellect but rather the intellect, since it is a mode, is “in” the substantial attribute of Thought. So, the question is not whether the attributes themselves are intellectual fictions, since they are the reality presupposed by the intellect. The question is whether the distinction between attribute and substance, as the intellect perceives it, is real. Thus, how should we understand the unity or “oneness” of a substance with an infinity of attributes each one of which expresses an infinity of its kind?

To understand the simultaneous unity and distinction through which substance and attribute are related we have to understand why the idea of one leads to the idea of the other. We

⁴³⁸ *Letter 4, to Oldenburg.*

can find this in part one of the *Ethics* between propositions nine and fifteen where Spinoza moves from the impossibility of various substances comprising various attributes to the idea of an infinitely singular substance necessarily comprising an absolute infinity of attribution. Spinoza summarized this transition in *Letter 9* to de Vries, but Macherey notes that we can also find it in *Letter 36* to Hudde: “if we suppose that something which is indeterminate and perfect only in its own kind exists by its own sufficiency, then we must also grant the existence of a being which is absolutely indeterminate and perfect. This Being I shall call God.”⁴³⁹ Or, as Macherey puts it:

If we know the perfection of attributes, we must also know that it cannot be understood outside of the absolute perfection of God, who contains them all. In fact, if we confine ourselves to the attributes, each considered on its own, we would naturally be led to think about them negatively and oppose them to each other, by grasping the specific nature of each one through what is lacking in all the others. But the infinity of attributes can be grasped positively only if we restore to it an absolutely infinite divine nature, in which they coexist without opposition.⁴⁴⁰

What Macherey does not fully explain, however, is that Spinoza’s argument actually depends on what Deleuze in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* describes as a distinction between the numerical and the real. We can paraphrase Spinoza’s argument as *the more reality belongs to a being, then the more attributes it must involve, and the more attributes it involves then the more it must exist*. But how do we know that Spinoza is not reasoning in a circle by equating the terms

⁴³⁹ *Letter 36*, to Hudde.

⁴⁴⁰ Macherey, 96.

real and existence? We can know this simply because Spinoza does not use the terms “real” and “existence” synonymously.

The numerical/real distinction is found in the first part of the *Ethics*:

(I) the true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined. From which it follows, (II) that no definition involves or expresses any certain number of individuals, since it expresses nothing other than the nature of the thing defined . . . (III) . . . for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists. Finally . . . (IV) that this cause, on account of which a thing exists, either must be contained in the very nature and definition of the existing thing (*viz. that it pertains to its nature to exist*) or must be outside it. From these propositions it follows that if, in Nature, a certain number of individuals exists, there must be a cause why those individuals, and why neither more nor fewer, exist.⁴⁴¹

Spinoza’s point is that numerical distinctions may *exist* but are never *real*. If there is more than one thing of the same definition or essence, then the causes that determine the existence of that number are distinct from the causes that determine the reality or essence that is enumerated.

For example, if twenty men exist in Nature (*to make the matter clearer, I assume that they exist at the same time, and that no others previously existed in Nature*), it will not be enough (i.e., *to give a reason why twenty men exist*) to show the cause of human nature in general; but it will be necessary in addition to show the cause why not more and not fewer than twenty exist. For there must necessarily be a cause why each particular man exists. But this cause cannot be contained in human nature itself, since the true definition

⁴⁴¹ EIP8schol.2.

of man does not involve the number 20. So the cause why these twenty men exist, and consequently, why each of them exists, must necessarily be outside each of them.⁴⁴²

Numerical distinctions are thus always distinguished externally by an enumerator and so have a relatively low degree of objective *existence* but cannot be conceived as strictly *real* such that they subsist in and of themselves. In this way we should think of numbers as *propria* that exist in-another (the human intellect) which do not indicate anything of the thing that they number. Numeration as such is the effect of a generality that, however useful, obscures the practical singularity according to which Spinoza thinks that things should be defined. We can define *propria* then as secondary properties or re-presentations of things as they exist in-another, and *attributes* as the primary powers according to which a thing is defined in-itself through its efficient cause. And since we have no recourse to externality when distinguishing the attributes from substance, we cannot assign substance a *real* number.

If substance could be numerically distinguished, it would presuppose an external vantage point required for that enumeration. But the idea of the absolute cannot be explained by something outside itself since that would dissolve its absolute nature. Substance therefore cannot be distinguished numerically and consequentially there cannot be “two” substances with the same attribute. Equally, however, there also cannot be “one” substance with one, two, three, or however many attributes. In other words, “numerical distinction is never real . . . [and] conversely, real distinction is never numerical. Spinoza’s argument now becomes: attributes are really distinct; but real distinction is never numerical; so there is only one substance for all attributes.”⁴⁴³

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 34.

We can now understand the paradoxical singularity through which Spinoza relates the ideas of substance and attributes. Contrary to Hegel's critique, substance is not a monolithic entity that empties itself outside of itself. And contrary to the reading of the German Idealists cited above, Spinoza's idea of substance cannot be understood as a return to Eleatic monism. According to Spinoza, God is the paradoxical unity of an absolute or unlimited substance that coheres an infinity of attributes within and through its absolute existence. The paradox is that there is only one substance since its absolute essence excludes the possibility of substances in the plural, and yet that oneness involves an infinite multiplicity of attribution that cannot be counted with any significance.

In conclusion, the intellectual action of distinction can only be said to be an illusory fiction if the distinguishing intellect confuses the nature of a real distinction for a numerical one. But, according to the paradox, this argument cuts both ways. If there is no sense in distinguishing the attributes by counting them, then neither is there any sense in counting substance as "one" since there is nothing but substance from which its counting could "count."

. . . God can only improperly be called one or single, I reply that a thing can be called one or single only in respect of its existence, not of its essence. For we do not conceive things under the category of numbers unless they are included in a common class . . . Now since the existence of God is his very essence, and since we can form no universal idea of his essence, it is certain that he who calls God one or single has no true idea of God, or is speaking of him improperly.⁴⁴⁴

If therefore we describe substance or God as "unique" or "singular" or "one" this is not because these words indicate anything about its own nature or reality, these propria indicate only our

⁴⁴⁴ *Letter 50, to Jelles.*

limited human power to speak of and imagine its nature (although evidently not to think it). Such a description conceives the idea of God not from its real infinite nature but from its finite or numerical effects on the human imagination which understands it more from the nature of human affection than from its efficient cause. Thus, to conceive God as “one” being as opposed to “two” or however many would be the same thing as if we were to understand God as a being that was somehow male or female, tall or short, happy or sad. These are only *propria* that indicate nothing in itself and are only affections that “we are accustomed to feign because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another.”⁴⁴⁵ To overcome the partiality of *propria*, Spinoza discovers the singularizing nature of attributes that are distinguished from one another not by virtue of an external observer than counts and compares them, but by virtue of the immanent powers that they involve and express. “The ontological argument, in Spinoza, no longer bears on an indeterminate being that is supposed infinitely perfect, but rather on absolute infinity, determined as that which consists of an infinity of attributes.”⁴⁴⁶

b. Weak or Paradoxical Individuals?

In an article titled *Acosmism or Weak Individuals: Hegel, Spinoza, and the Reality of the Finite*, Yitzhak Melamed argues that German Idealists’ charge of acosmism is a misreading of Spinoza’s nuanced position, but even so Spinoza’s philosophy affords only a “weak” concept of individuality. Contrary to the acosmist reading, Melamed argues that Spinoza’s concept of modification is indispensable to the substantial expression of the “real” but that modes themselves retains only a weak sense of independence and individuality. In other words,

⁴⁴⁵ EIV preface.

⁴⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 74.

Melamed argues that modes are *real* because they are not mere intellectual fictions as the acosmist charge suggests, but that modes cannot *really* be described as independent and individual. At least not in a way that Melamed considers to constitute a “strong” theory of individuality. Melamed suggests that what Spinoza denies is not the existence of God or the World, as such, but rather the existence of the human individual. Hence, Melamed thinks that Spinoza’s weak theory of individuality follows from a persistently anti-humanist attitude. “The annihilation of man, and not the annihilation of God, is the charge one should bring against Spinoza, according to Hegel. I believe Hegel was right to detect a strong anti-humanist tendency in Spinoza’s thought . . .”⁴⁴⁷ The implication is that a strong theory of individuality would be unpalatable to Spinoza because of the anthropocentrism that its “strength” would imply. I argue that Melamed only arrives at this conclusion because he does not perceive the role of paradoxical singularity in Spinoza’s thinking. Therefore, my aim in this section is to demonstrate that Spinoza’s concept of (paradoxical) singularity and individuality will appear “weak” or misanthropic only to the extent that a “strong” notion would have to subscribe to and receive its strength from a concept in which individuals and collectives are conceived through binary opposition rather than paradox. But since one of Spinoza’s most valuable contributions to modern thought is its power to overcome the superficiality of binary opposition, the “strong” sense of individuality that Melamed thinks is absent in Spinoza’s thought is completely undesirable. I want to redeploy Spinoza’s idea of individual and singular things within the paradox of singularity.

What does Spinoza mean by *singular things* (*res singulares*) and *individuals* (*individua*)? Spinoza’s idea of individuality differs significantly from our contemporary usage. We might

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 92.

understand today by the term “individual” a reference to a particular person or thing at the exclusion of the general class to which that person or thing might otherwise belong. This idea of individuality, however, only “passes the buck” down the philosophical road at which point we must still inquire into the individuality or essential character of general classes if we are to propose non-arbitrary distinctions. Alternatively, a relatively conventional way of positing non-arbitrary distinctions in 17th century European thought was to make recourse to distinct units of self-subsisting elements. Something could be said to be an individual in this sense of the word if it can exist without the concept or aid of another thing. Although we may be able to describe the attributes of substance as true individuals in this sense, insofar as the attributes of substance “do not require the concept of another thing from which it must be formed,”⁴⁴⁸ this definition would prohibit the description of modes as true individuals since modes presuppose and are explained by the attribute(s) that their essence and existence involve. Spinoza never hesitates to remind the reader that God is the absolute and only substance, and that “bodies are distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and *not by reason of substance*.”⁴⁴⁹ If, however, we simply left our inquiry here then it would indeed appear as though God were the only real individual and that all other things, human beings included, were only the fleeting and ephemeral moments that taken together sum-up the real. But, as we have seen, the “real” is not numerically distinguishable for Spinoza. We have also seen that the intuitive idea of God that every human mind involves is of itself necessarily substantial. Hence, something else is at work here in Spinoza’s concept of individuality.

⁴⁴⁸ EID3.

⁴⁴⁹ EII Sketch of a Physical Treatise, L1. Emphasis added.

Spinoza cannot use the thesis of self-sufficiency or irreducibility to qualify his notion of individuality, nevertheless he uses the terms *singular things* and *individuals* to refer to specific finite existents. So, how does Spinoza define and employ these terms in the *Ethics*. “By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of Individuals *so concur in one action* that together they are all [the] cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.”⁴⁵⁰ So why does Melamed consider this definition too weak a criteria to strongly define singularity?

According to Spinoza’s definition, neither physical nor temporal proximity, nor even belonging to the same class of things seems to be a necessary requirement for grouping diverse modes together in a single action. To illustrate this, Melamed asks us to follow a hypothetical example that purports to expose the weakness of the definition. Take, for example, Napoleon Bonaparte’s marriage proposal to his beloved yet aloof Josephine. Josephine is sitting in her room considering his proposal but a fly lands on her nose, affecting her with a feeling of annoyance. Josephine, now affected with a sad-passion, proceeds to call her mother for advice on the proposal, but mother’s preaching only serves to upset her further. Then, suddenly, an earthquake hits that perhaps Josephine imagines to be a sign from God. All of these events, Melamed suggests, “so concur in one action,” such that according to Spinoza’s definition we should understand 1) the fly, 2) mother’s preaching, and 3) the earthquake all to factor into the constitution of one singular thing – namely, Josephine’s decision. Melamed writes:

But if the fly, the earthquake, and the mother’s preaching constitute a singular thing for Spinoza, then it seems that it is merely a matter of coming up with a matching story in order to show that *any* aggregate of things, under certain circumstances, could constitute

⁴⁵⁰ EIID7. Emphasis added.

a singular thing. It also seems that an entity can be part of numerous, in fact infinitely many, singular things, “to the extent” that it is taking part in the causation of various things.⁴⁵¹

Melamed seems to have forgotten a foundational axiom and proposition of Spinoza’s metaphysics: 1) “things that have nothing in common with one another also cannot be understood through one another, *or* the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other.”⁴⁵² 2) “If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other.”⁴⁵³ Thus, EIA5 and EIP3 clearly indicate the impossibility, for Spinoza, of arbitrary determination or causation. Spinoza argues instead that two things can only be mutually determined or “aggregated” according to what their natures have in common. In other words, no two things, creatures, or beings can be considered to form a singular thing except insofar as they share a capacity or power for affecting and/or being affected. “All modes by which a body is affected by another body follow both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body . . .”⁴⁵⁴ Thus, it is precisely because “all bodies agree in certain things,”⁴⁵⁵ namely that they are conceived through the common attribute of Extension, that all bodies can mutually affect and be affected by their common powers of speed and rest. Contrary to Melamed’s interpretation, therefore, Spinoza’s criteria for grouping modes together as something singular is not “arbitrary” in the sense that any two random things can be grouped together. Instead, the criteria according to which Spinoza conceives things to cohere or dissolve

⁴⁵¹ Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals?,” 86.

⁴⁵² EIA5.

⁴⁵³ EIP3.

⁴⁵⁴ EII Physical Digression A1”.

⁴⁵⁵ EII Physical Digression L2.

in a constituted unity is determined by the compatibility of their powers. If two things have no way to affect one another, if nothing common pertains to their natures, then they cannot be considered to constitute a singular thing. However, perhaps the compatibility of common powers is too weak a standard, so we should take special care to consider the way concurrence is interpreted.

In what sense does the fly, the earthquake, and Josephine's mother's preaching constitute a single thing in Melamed's example? What does the fly, the earthquake, and mother's preaching have in common such that their affects, for Melamed, can concur in one action? It seems to me that the only common factor in which these three actions concur is either in their external proclivity to affect and be affected by various degrees of speed and rest insofar as they are externally determined by other extended things. But in this case the cognitive and emotional significance of Josephine's decision is lost and the grouping becomes irrelevant and arbitrary. Or, alternatively, the fly, earthquake, and preaching so "concur" but only in Josephine's imagination insofar as she is considered under the attribute of Thought as a thinking thing. In either case, however, the singular thing in question is constituted only by the inadequate and extrinsic nature of Josephine's thinking. Melamed's example involves an equivocation that conflates the non-arbitrary grouping of extended bodies with their arbitrary grouping as a singular thing in Josephine's imagination. Melamed does not consider whether the singularity of this concurrence follows from Josephine's adequate or inadequate ideas, but laments the inadequate weakness that follows from the conflation that his reading involves. Melamed makes the same equivocation when he considers the other term that Spinoza used to designate particular things – an individual (*individuum*).⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁶ See Melamed, "Acosmism or Weak Individuals?," 86, n48.

Unsatisfied with Spinoza's definition of singularity, Melamed proceeds to Spinoza's definition of an individual to see if it provides a stronger foundation. But Melamed limits his consideration only to Spinoza's discussion of individuals in the Physical Digression in part two of the *Ethics*:

Definition: When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies.⁴⁵⁷

Following this definition of composite individuals, Melamed believes that Spinoza's full theory of individuality can be seen to unfold in the subsequent lemmas. The key to understanding this theory is in the way individuals "communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner." Lemma four posits that one part of an individual can be replaced by another part of the same kind without any essential change of its identity,⁴⁵⁸ lemma five that an individual can retain its identity even if its parts change in size provided that they maintain the same ratio of motion and rest as they did before,⁴⁵⁹ lemma six and seven posit that even if this ratio of motion and rest is altered on the scale of the whole, the essential identity of the whole individual does not change

⁴⁵⁷ EII Physical Digression, Definition.

⁴⁵⁸ "If, of a body, or of an individual, which is composed of a number of bodies, some are removed, and at the same time as many others of the same nature take their place, the body or the individual will retain its nature, as before, without any change of its form." EII Physical Digression L4.

⁴⁵⁹ "If the parts composing an individual become greater or less, but in such a proportion that they all keep the same ratio of motion and rest each other as before, then the individual will likewise retain its nature, as before, without any change of form." EII Physical Digression L5.

if the internal relation between its parts are preserved.⁴⁶⁰ But this elaborated version still does not constitute a strong enough theory for Melamed. “When we look carefully at Spinoza’s criteria as to what constitutes an *individuum*, they seem almost as permissive as the criteria for a singular thing. *Prima facie*, it seems to allow for one individual to be part of many – probably, infinitely many – other individuals.”⁴⁶¹

Melamed offers another hypothetical example to emphasize the weakness of Spinoza’s theory: imagine, for whatever reason, that the Queen of England, who is a single individual insofar as she conserves a fixed ratio of motion and rest, were tied-up tightly to the King of France such that both of their ratios of motion and rest are changed. The question Melamed wants us to ask is whether or not, if the two are “constrained” tightly enough, does this new relation constitute a new royal individual? The original two do not cease to exist and yet this example seems to meet Spinoza’s criteria for the constitution of a new individual. Melamed ultimately thinks that Spinoza’s theory of individuality is “weak” precisely because “Spinoza explicitly allows for the possibility of one individual [to be] part of another individual.”⁴⁶²

Melamed summarizes his critique of Spinoza’s theory of individuality in three points:

If (1) individuals can have scattered parts and (2) the fact that a certain area of space constitutes a specific individual does not exclude the possibility that the same area (at the same time) is part of infinitely many other individuals, it would seem that Spinoza’s

⁴⁶⁰ “If certain bodies composing an individual are compelled to alter the motion they have from one direction to another, but so that they can continue their motions and communicate them to each other in the same ratio as before, the individual will likewise retain its nature, without any change of form.” EII Physical Digression L6; “Furthermore, the individual so composed retains its nature, whether it, as a whole, moves or is at rest, or whether it moves in this or that direction, so long as each part retains its motion, and communicates it, as before, to the others.” EII Physical Digression L7.

⁴⁶¹ Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals?,” 88.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

notion of an individual is almost as weak as that of a singular thing. Furthermore, (3) the stipulation that parts of the same individual “communicate their motions to each other” and preserve the same proportion of motion and rest does not tell us *how long* these parts should preserve the same proportion in order to be counted as genuine individuals.⁴⁶³

However, each of these three points of criticism expose a misunderstanding in Melamed’s analysis of Spinoza’s theory of individuality. Firstly, the “scattering” of the parts of an individual only constitutes a diffusion and therefore weakness of individuality if that idea of diffusion is not accompanied by an equivalent notion of agreement and composition in which individuality is concentrated.

For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To [the hu]man, then, there is nothing more useful than [other hum]man[s]. [Human’s], I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of [their] being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and One Body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.⁴⁶⁴

I argue that the weakness of the theory of individuality that Melamed perceives in Spinoza follows more from the weakness of Melamed’s examples than from Spinoza’s theory itself. For, if two otherwise separated and disinterested individuals are bound to each other by sheer external force – say, for example, by being tied together by a rope – and whose arbitrary grouping

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁶⁴ EIVP18schol.

constitute no internal agreement or composition, then this would obviously constitute a very weak and unstable individual indeed.

Melamed's second point assumes that a "strong" theory of individuality would presuppose a principle of non-contradiction in which the individuality of one thing would exclude the individuality of all others. Yet, as I have already demonstrated in the second chapter of this study, a metaphysical rule of non-contradiction would have to be predicated on classical teleology that would inevitably oppose the ideas of parts and wholes such that we could conceive no adequate idea of either. But Spinoza's theory of individuality does not refer exclusively to either parts or wholes since both must be able to be conceived individually according to a particular nature. For "if we proceed in this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual."⁴⁶⁵ Alternatively, if Spinoza's theory of individuality could only conceive individuals insofar as they were *either* a part *or* a whole but not both, then this would also be as weak a theory because if the standard would remain relative and arbitrary.

Melamed's third point of criticism is as problematic as the previous two. Melamed's implied idea of a strong theory of individuality wants a quantifiable time in which to conceive the durability of individuals but this is simply beyond the power of human thought. We simply cannot infinitely extend the scope in which we conceive the causes that concur in a single effect. Our power to think and perceive the ontological horizon of causes is quite clearly limited to the singular conditions of the human body, mind, and the relatively small portion of the universe we happen to inhabit. This is why Spinoza argues that "the mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused knowledge of itself, its own body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things

⁴⁶⁵ EII 'Physical Digression' L7schol.

after the common order of nature, that is, so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions.”⁴⁶⁶ Due to the inherent limitations of the human intellect, human beings can only produce an *indefinite* and therefore inadequate idea of the infinite concurrence of causes as they effect particular things.⁴⁶⁷ This is why Spinoza insists that “we can only have a very inadequate knowledge of the duration of our body” since such duration is not determined by its essence but on its fortuitous encounter with other bodies.⁴⁶⁸ For “there is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful which the first can be destroyed.”⁴⁶⁹ Thus the theory of singularity and individuality that Melamed seeks, that is, a theory capable of designating particular units through the spatiotemporal coordinates that they occupy, would simply be self-defeating since it would inevitably be destroyed by the very same singularity through which it is conceived.

If Melamed was seeking a Spinozistic theory of human individuality in which we could conceive of human individuals as *persons*, or – to say it in a more Kantian fashion – as *dignified* individuals, then he should not have abstracted individuals from the thoughtful condition of their dignity, of their singularity. Scholars like Melamed tend to consider the question of human singularity or individuality in Spinoza without engaging the kind of singularity that Spinoza conceives “sub specie aeternitatis” in the fifth part of the *Ethics*.

⁴⁶⁶ EIIP29schol.

⁴⁶⁷ “*Indefinite* is that whose limits (if it has any) cannot be discovered by the human intellect.” PCPIID4.

⁴⁶⁸ EIIP30.

⁴⁶⁹ EIVA1.

We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, *or* real, we conceive under a species of eternity, and their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God.⁴⁷⁰

It is clear, however, that this alternative is not an either/or in which we must either conceive things as finitely located in space and time *or* in eternity. Eternity, as such, is not something that exists outside of and separate from human time as if it were the Platonic Form of time itself. It is the infinite idea in which the finite idea of natural time is situated, it is the time in which the time we count *counts*. “Eternity is the very essence of God insofar as this involves necessary existence. To conceive things under a species of eternity, therefore, is to conceive things insofar as they are conceived through God’s essence, as *real beings*, or insofar as through God’s essence they involve existence.”⁴⁷¹ When Spinoza proposes that “the more we understand singular things, the more we understand God,”⁴⁷² we should understand the “singular things” to which Spinoza refers as those things we conceive under a species of eternity through the kind of knowledge that Spinoza calls *intuition*:

Again, because the essence of our mind consists only in knowledge, of which God is the beginning and foundation, it is clear to us how our mind, with respect both to essence and existence, follows from the divine nature, and continually depends on God. I thought this worth the trouble of noting here, in order to show by this example how much the

⁴⁷⁰ EVP29schol.

⁴⁷¹ EVP30dem.

⁴⁷² EVP24.

knowledge of singular things I have called intuitive, *or* knowledge of the third kind, can accomplish, and how much more powerful it is than the universal knowledge that I have called knowledge of the second kind. For although I have shown generally in Part I that all things (and consequently the human mind also) depend on God both for their essence and their existence, nevertheless, that demonstration, though legitimate and put beyond all chance of doubt, still does not affect our mind as much as when this is inferred from the very essence of any singular thing which we say depends on God.⁴⁷³

The reason why the affect of this idea is so great is because it has the nature of the mind as its cause, and the mind takes joy in the perfection from which it can act from itself alone. That is, it is because “the third kind of knowledge depends on the mind, as on a formal cause, insofar as the mind itself is eternal.”⁴⁷⁴ In other words, the mind takes joy in its actions because it is through action that it transitions to a greater perfection, and joy is the affection of this transition. Thus, since the third kind of knowledge has the mind as its formal cause, “the more each of us is able to achieve in this kind of knowledge, the more he is conscious of himself and of God, that is, the more perfect and blessed he is.”⁴⁷⁵ And if perfection and action are mutually presupposing ideas for Spinoza, then the converse is equally true. That is, “the more perfection each thing has, the more it acts and the less it is acted on; [so] conversely, the more it acts, the more perfect it is.”⁴⁷⁶

This does not mean that the human individual of whom we have an eternal, singular idea ceases to exist as something embodied in a particular place and time simply by virtue of that idea. The paradox is that even though we have the idea of the infinite and of the eternal we do

⁴⁷³ EVP36schol.

⁴⁷⁴ EVP31.

⁴⁷⁵ EVP31schol.

⁴⁷⁶ EVP40.

not thereby cease to be finite and embodied things. In other words, the paradox is that even though we are finite beings with particular bodies and minds that involve their own limitations, we nonetheless possess adequate ideas of those limitations which do not follow from the finite, extrinsic, and inadequate aspects of our existence. This is why Spinoza conceives human nature to be whole (perfect) and partial (imperfect) at once. The paradox is that perfection relates to the very nature of the human intellect which is singularized by that perfection to the extent that human beings have an idea of their imperfections. “If joy, then, consists in the passage to a greater perfection, blessedness must surely consist in the fact that the mind is endowed with perfection itself.”⁴⁷⁷

Melamed’s article succeeds in demonstrating that without attending to Spinoza’s doctrine of conatus, his theory of singularity and individuality will seem weak. “The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.”⁴⁷⁸ By attending to Spinoza’s theory of conatus, we can understand how the essence of an individual human being (their character or personality) follows from the particular ways they appropriate their affects in their desire for a greater (or lesser) perfection of their essence or being. But a study of Spinoza’s theory of singularity and individuality should be able to account for the intrinsic and extrinsic ways in which things are singularized. As we have seen, singularity and individuality can be either *imposed* from a perspective extrinsic to the individual thing and enumerated, or *composed* from the unique agreement of intrinsic powers that renders something singular beyond enumeration. If a thing is considered to be an individual but only from an imaginary and extrinsic perspective, like in the way that Melamed suggests a lion might interpret

⁴⁷⁷ EVP33schol.

⁴⁷⁸ EIIP7. Perhaps we should improve Spinoza’s formulation here and add “the striving by which each [individual] strives . . .”

“a human being, a corpse, and a human sausage” to be the same individual just as “three tomatoes and half an onion [would] constitute one salad for us,”⁴⁷⁹ then that individual will be neither unique nor singular, but simply an indistinguishable “one” of many. Even if we conceive singular things from the perspective of reason or through the common-notions that belong to their parts but without attending to the singularizing conditions of their coherence and agreement, that individual will still only be a loosely collected aggregate of stuff. Spinoza’s theory of individuality and singularity must account for to the three kinds of knowledge that therefore expresses three different kinds of individuals and singular things.

Hence, what we learn from Spinoza’s theory is not that “any designation of individuals depends upon the interests (and measurement capabilities) of the designator” such that “reality, in itself, is just undifferentiated stuff.”⁴⁸⁰ We would have concluded this way only if we confined our consideration of individuality and singular things to imaginary and extrinsic premises. Instead, what we learn is that it is the relation between parts and wholes, and not the parts or wholes themselves that singularize an individual. If, for Spinoza, it was the parts or wholes themselves that characterized individuals then we would have to, as Melamed does, interpret Spinoza’s theory of individuality through the presumption of a “technical” and a “loose” sense of the term.⁴⁸¹ This would superimpose an opposition between the singularity of *modes* in the technical but weak sense of the term and the singularity of *substance* in the non-technical but strong sense of the term. But in this case, we would never be able to conceive the human being through the paradox of a substantial mode and we would inevitably resign our reading of

⁴⁷⁹ Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals?” 84.

⁴⁸⁰ Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals?,” 84–85.

⁴⁸¹ See Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals?,” 86, n46 and n48.

Spinoza's philosophy to misanthropy and anti-humanism. Yet, to do so would be to ignore the profound identification of ontology and ethics that constitutes Spinoza's contribution to modern thought.

What we learn from Spinoza's theory of individuality is that, despite the inevitable changes that individual and singular things undergo and overcome throughout their existence, individual and singular things should be identified through the constancy of their relations, even if all the parts constitutive of those relations can be replaced. This is important because it means that the greater complexity and organization of parts constitutive of a given individual then the greater that individual's power will be to undergo changes that do not affect it with a fundamental loss of identity or essence. Or, as Spinoza says, "if we should now conceive another individual composed of several individuals of *different natures*, we shall find that it can be affected in a great many other ways, and still preserve its nature."⁴⁸²

But Spinoza also writes that if "two individuals of *entirely the same nature* are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one."⁴⁸³ How can we account for and explain this apparent contradiction? On the one hand, the compatibility of common natures acts as the principle of composition and the multiplication of powers. But, on the other hand, the scholium of EIIIL7 posits that individuals are more stable the more their nature is composed of different individuals of different natures. What is going on here?

If we attend to the contexts in which the diverging formulas appear, we will see that the subject of EIIIL7 is concerned only with the corporeal nature of bodies whose individuality is determined by its ratio of motion and rest in relation to other bodies. Hence, the heterogeneity

⁴⁸² EIIIL7schol. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸³ EIVP18schol. Emphasis added.

involved in EIII7 refers only to relative differences of speed and inertia in which bodies compound, repel, and attract. “So far we have conceived an individual which is composed only of bodies which are distinguished from one another only by motion and rest, speed and slowness, that is, which is composed of the simplest bodies.”⁴⁸⁴ But since the infinity of extension precludes the possibility of either a natural vacuum or an atomistic (undividable/uncuttable) substratum,⁴⁸⁵ the kinds of compositions that Spinoza has so far considered have been composite and combinatorial but only from a relatively simple point of view. Due to the dynamics involved in this theory, we can magnify or minimize the conditions and limits of an individual into greater or lesser orders of individuation as particularly conserved ratios of motion and rest. Therefore, the greater an individual’s organizational diversity, the greater constancy of relation exists between its parts. So, “if we proceed in this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change.”⁴⁸⁶ Thus, EIII7 conceives the multiplication of powers through a theory of individuation in which the durable powers of an individual correspond to its diversity or heterogeneity of composition. According to Spinoza’s heterogenous theory of individuation, then, every conceivable individual is part of some more complex individual, but that participation does not thereby cancel its original identity because its coherence in the greater whole presupposes the constancy of the relations constitutive of its initial existence.

Spinoza’s *Letter 32* (to Oldenburg) offers enormous insight into his theory of individuation. It is illustrated through the example of a small worm living in some larger

⁴⁸⁴ EIII7schol.

⁴⁸⁵ “There are no atoms.” PDPIIP5. For an excellent analysis of this topic see Jonathan Bennett, “Spinoza’s Vacuum Argument,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980): 391–99.

⁴⁸⁶ EIII7schol.

creature's blood, who itself, presumably lives within some still greater individual. Given the relevance of this illustration, I will cite the passage in its entirety:

Now let us feign now, if you please, that there is a little worm living in the blood, capable of distinguishing by sight the particles of the blood, of lymph, etc., and capable of observing by reason how each particle, when it encounters another, either bounces back, or communicates a part of its motion, etc. Indeed, it would live in this blood as we do in this part of the universe, and would consider each particle of the blood as a whole, not a part. It could not know how all the parts of the blood are regulated by the universal nature of the blood, and compelled to adapt themselves to one another, as the universal nature of the blood requires, so that they agree with one another in a definite way. . . For if we should feign that there are no causes outside the blood which would communicate new motions to the blood, and no space outside the blood, nor any other bodies to which the particles of blood could transfer their motion, it is certain that the blood would always remain in the same state, and its particles would undergo no variations other than those which can be conceived from the given relation of the motion of the blood to the lymph, chyle, etc. Thus the blood would always have to be considered as a whole and not as a part. But because there are a great many other causes which regulate the laws of the nature of the blood in a definite way, and which in turn are regulated by the blood, the result is that other motions and other variations arise in [the particles of] the blood which follow not simply from the relation of the motion of its parts to one another, but from the relation of the motion of the blood [as a whole] and of its external causes to one another.

In this way the blood has the nature of a part and not of a whole. This is what I say concerning whole and part.⁴⁸⁷

In this illustration we should see a humbling analogy comparing the perception of parts and wholes according to the common order of nature in which a human and a conspicuously intelligent worm might respectively exist. The worm inhabits the blood in a similar way as we inhabit the perceivable universe since both humans and the worm encounter parts and particles that are perceived as wholes even though they too participate in greater magnitudes of complexity. Like us, the worm would extrapolate its perceptions of the consistent patterns displayed by the particles into general laws, but the worm would not understand from this alone that these laws themselves as mere consequence of yet more general and composite laws. If the worm had no perception of a universe external to the blood it inhabits, it would have no reason to think the particles it perceives were anything but wholes in themselves.

The point of the illustration in *Letter 32* is not to suggest to Oldenburg that the worm errs by perceiving the particles as individuals, since they are indeed individuals according to Spinoza's theory insofar as they maintain consistent relations. The error follows only from conceiving an individual in terms of its alienation and abstraction from a whole – that is, from its interactions with the contextualizing environment that envelops it. The only adequate way of conceiving the singularity that defines an individual therefore is through its relations to other individuals.⁴⁸⁸ For, to consider an individual in abstraction from its determinant relations to others and vice versa is to consider exactly *no body* and *no thing* because to be determined by

⁴⁸⁷ *Letter 32*, to Oldenburg.

⁴⁸⁸ “For all the modes in which a body is affected follow from the nature of the affected body, and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body.” EIIP16dem.

nothing is to have no properties, and only “nothing has no properties.”⁴⁸⁹ Thus, it is simply meaningless to claim that a “scattered” connection to other individuals minimizes the subjective or personal aspect of those individuals because Spinoza’s theory shows that interconnection is the precondition for the durability and power of any singular or individual thing. The theory of heterogenous individuation demonstrated that to be an individual is to be the focal point of an action connected in an infinity of ways to a constellation of other individuals. The more magnitudes of individuality an individual contains, therefore, the stronger and more powerful that individual is.

c. Striving for Freedom: Conatus as the Identity of Intellect and Will

Spinoza’s use of the ontological argument and his idea of freedom are deeply connected. Readers who do not perceive or agree that the ontological argument plays a significant role in Spinoza’s philosophy are prone to compare his ideas with prebiblical philosophers.⁴⁹⁰ But I argue that these comparisons are problematic because they tend to reduce Spinoza’s nuanced idea of freedom to fatalisms that he consistently denied.⁴⁹¹ Commentators looking to compare Spinoza

⁴⁸⁹ PDPIIA1.

⁴⁹⁰ I argued for the absolute break between Spinoza and the ancients in chapter two of this study. Recall, for example, my discussion of the work of Susan James. While James’ work otherwise displays many profound insights into Spinoza’s transindividual project, James does not recognize Spinoza’s break from the ancients. For example, in the introductory chapter of *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together* James writes: “Spinoza’s insistence on the simultaneously theoretical and practical quality of our understanding echoes a classical conception of philosophy as the art of living” (2). James does not seem to appreciate here that even if, for example, Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and the book of *Exodus*, both portray “an art of living,” the artistry for which these lives are lived have nothing in common and are in fact completely opposed. The comparison only serves to obfuscate both. James proceeds to compare Spinoza’s art of living to the philosophies of ancient thinkers like Seneca (2), Cicero (35–42), and even Plato. “Spinoza is sympathetic to many aspects of [the] Stoic outlook . . .” (2). For comparisons to Plato see chapter twelve of *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together*, “The Affective Cost of Philosophical Self-Transformation,” (183–196) which makes many comparisons to Plato.

⁴⁹¹ In a letter addressed to Jacob Ostens, Spinoza replied to the false accusations leveled at him from Van Velthuysen: “No doubt that you’re surprised that I have made you wait so long, but till now I could hardly bring myself to reply to that man’s pamphlet, which you wanted to share with me...The foundation of his reasoning is

with prebiblical philosophers tend to focus on Spinoza's denial of freewill and his consistent affirmation of necessity. From this perspective, there might appear to be similarities between Spinoza and, for example, the ideals of Stoicism since both deny freewill and affirm necessity. For, if there is no freewill and every existing individual is thoroughly determined in their action, then Zeno and Chrisippus' analogy of the dog and cart might seem like an appropriate analogy with which to describe Spinoza's critiques.⁴⁹² However, there are irremediable differences between Spinoza's philosophy of freedom and the ideals of the Stoics that render these similarities superficial. Stoicism is inextricably linked to the affirmation of and justification for the socio-political conditions of slavery in which it was conceived. According to the ideals of Stoicism, a slave, plebian, citizen, aristocrat, senator, and even the emperor himself are all alike to the degree that they are all but dogs chained to the inevitable movements of a cosmic carriage to which they had better submit than contest. Individuals thus have the illusory choice to thrash at their chains and choke, or to trot along "willingly." The stoical idea of freedom then is that it is an illusion that applies equally to the lowest slave and the most venerated emperors alike. But can anyone who has read Spinoza's many emphasises on the escape (exodus) from passivity and bondage constitutive of human freedom really compare this to the ideals of Stoicism? I think the

this: he thinks I take away God's freedom and subject him to fate. This is false, of course. For I've maintained that everything follows with inevitable necessity from God's nature in the same way everyone maintains that it follows from God's nature that he understands himself. Of course, no one denies that God's understanding of himself follows from the divine nature. Nevertheless, no one conceives that God has been coerced by some fate, but everyone thinks God understands himself completely freely, even if necessarily. I find nothing here which anyone can't perceive. Nevertheless, if he believes these things are said with evil intent, what does he think about his Descartes, who maintained that everything we do was previously preordained by God, who indeed creates us anew, as it were, at each moment, and that nevertheless we act from the freedom of our will. Surely, as Descartes himself confesses, no one can comprehend this." L43.

⁴⁹² "When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow, it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity. But if the dog does not follow, it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they don't want to, they will be compelled to follow what is destined." Metaphor formulated by Zeno and Chrysippus and reported by the Roman Bishop Hippolytus, qtd. in Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 107.

answer is no. Whatever superficial similarities appear between the two philosophies, the ends that those similarities serve are entirely incompatible. However, it is not my intention here to directly argue against those who insist on making these kinds of comparisons. My aim in this section, is to show that Spinoza's critique of freewill is fundamentally rooted in the affirmation of human freedom as the transition to an ever-greater (or lesser) perfection of individual nature. Contrary to the ideals of Stoics, therefore, the impossibility of a freewill does not for Spinoza preclude the possibility of freedom itself. Spinoza's idea of human freedom can be found in his concept of conatus or desire as it expresses the dynamics of an individual's transition between greater and lesser perfection.

Spinoza's critique of freewill is not explicitly introduced in the *Ethics* until EIIP48–49 where he conflates the idea of “intellect” and “will.” However, the premise of this conflation is implied at least as early as EIIP7 with what the secondary literature (but not Spinoza himself) describes as ontological parallelism. According to EIIP7, the attributes of Thought and Extension and the modes that they express should not be conceived through opposition because they ultimately refer to one and the same thing – namely, substance. “For example, a circle existing in Nature and the idea of the existing circle, which is also in God, are one and the same thing, which is explained through different attributes. Therefore, whether we conceive Nature under the attribute of extension, or under the attribute of thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, that is, that the same things follow one another.”⁴⁹³ Consequently, “the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that. So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in

⁴⁹³ EIIP7schol.

two ways. Some of the Hebrews seem to have seen this, as if through a cloud, when they maintained that God, God's intellect, and the things understood by him are one and the same."⁴⁹⁴

The idea of the ontological parallelism of the attributes thus posits that the true idea of a thing and the extended body of which it is an idea are two divergent expressions of one substantial modification.

Two important principles follow from Spinoza's doctrine of parallelism. Firstly, if "a circle existing in Nature and the idea of the existing circle, which is also in God, are one and the same thing" then it follows that the singular essence of modes can be expressed in differing ways. So, the first principle that we can infer is that modes which share a common essence can express that nature differently through the particular attributes in which they exist. In other words, one and the same thing can be expressed in a multiplicity of ways without compromising its essence. The second principle is that ideas causally relate to other ideas in a way that *parallels* the causality of extended bodies. This is important because if the attributes of substance must be conceived through themselves alone then bodies cannot be conceived to determine ideas and ideas cannot be conceived to determine bodies. Instead, each attribute must be conceived to possess a causality immanent to its nature. "From this it follows that the formal being of things which are not modes of thinking does not follow from the divine nature because God has first known the things; rather the objects of ideas follow and are inferred from their attributes in the same way and by the same necessity as that with which we have shown ideas to follow from the attributes of thought."⁴⁹⁵ Thus, the idea of ontological parallelism requires that we conceive a causal equivalence between the determinate actions of bodies and minds such that we understand

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ EIP6cor.

one sequence of ideas to necessarily produce other ideas in the same way that extended bodies necessarily communicate their motions to other bodies in determinant ways.

The parallelism of the attributes thus provides the context in which the essence and existence of modes follow from the ontological powers that they express. For this reason, Spinoza thinks that the essence that singularizes the actual existence of a mode can be defined by discovering the way “each thing, as far as it can, and as far as it can by its own power, strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its being.”⁴⁹⁶ In other words, if certain powers necessarily follow from the essence or definition of a thing, and nothing can do anything other than what follows from its essence, then it follows that “the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.”⁴⁹⁷ Alternatively, whatever actions and passions that a mode is capable of must either follow from its immanent nature considered in itself or from the transitive nature of external things affecting it. But since these affects are external to existential conditions of the thing itself, they are also contingent and cannot on their own explain the nature of the thing or why it is affected in a particular way. Therefore, these external affects can be removed until we find powers that cannot be removed without removing the thing. When we discover this irreducible power, we will also have discovered the essence of the thing.⁴⁹⁸

If we apply the concept of conatus to the question ‘*quid est homo*,’ it follows that the essence of a human being cannot be reduced to the determinations of extended bodies because human beings express an irreducible power of thought.⁴⁹⁹ Therefore, the essential conatus of a

⁴⁹⁶ EIII P6.

⁴⁹⁷ EIII P7.

⁴⁹⁸ “I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is also necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily also taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.” EIID2.

⁴⁹⁹ EIIA2.

human being must include not only the determination of extended bodies, but also the idea of those bodies. For we are not only determined insofar as we have a body, we also have determinate ideas of those determinations. Spinoza thinks that an adequate idea of the human essence must refer to both of these two irreducible attributes of human nature at once. Descartes' definition of the human being as "a thing that thinks"⁵⁰⁰ is therefore insufficient for Spinoza because this omits the ontological significance of the human body. Spinoza thus does not define the human essence by recourse to either the body or mind alone, but through a notion of *desire* that expresses the simultaneity of body and mind together. Hence, Spinoza defines the human conatus as desire, itself defined as an "*appetite together with consciousness of the appetite.*"⁵⁰¹

Although "the mind is necessarily conscious of itself through ideas of the body's affections,"⁵⁰² the mind can relate this consciousness to the body in ways that are more or less adequate. This is why Spinoza is careful to distinguish between the ideas of *desire*, *appetite*, and *will*:

Desire [*cupiditas*] is man's very essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something.

Exp.: We said above, in P9S, that desire is appetite together with the consciousness of it.

And appetite [*appetitus*] is the very essence of man, insofar as it is determined to do what promotes his preservation.

But in the same scholium I also warned that I really recognize no difference between human appetite and desire. For whether a man is conscious of his appetite or not, the

⁵⁰⁰ "What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me." Descartes, *Meditations* II, 52.

⁵⁰¹ EIIIP9schol.

⁵⁰² EIIIP9dem.

appetite still remains one and the same. And so – not to seem to commit a tautology – I did not wish to explain desire by appetite, but was anxious to so define it that I would comprehend together all the strivings of human nature that we signify by the name of appetite, will, desire, or impulse. For I could have said that desire is man’s very essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined to do something. But from this definition it would not follow that the mind could be conscious of its desire, *or* appetite. Therefore, in order to involve the cause of this consciousness, it was necessary (by the same proposition) to add: *insofar as it is conceived, from some given affection of it, to be determined*, and so on. For by an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence, whether it is innate or has come from outside, whether it is conceived through the attribute of thought alone, or through the attribute of extension alone, or is referred to both at once.

Here, therefore, by the word *desire* I understand any of a [human]’s strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions, which vary as the [human]’s constitution varies, and which are not infrequently so opposed to one another that the [human] is pulled in different directions and knows not where to turn.⁵⁰³

Although Spinoza conceives a distinction between *appetitus* and *cupiditas*, we see in this passage that he uses both to describe to the human conatus. The only difference between appetite and desire is the diminishment of consciousness in the former, but even unconscious appetites follow necessarily from the singular union that is the human body and soul. There is therefore an adequacy that relates more or less equally to appetite and desire since neither one involves the separation of a thing from the conditions of its actions. But the idea of a “will,” however, implies

⁵⁰³ EIII Definition of the Affects.

the fiction of a mind that exists apart from and can therefore determine the body to act as if the body was to the soul as a puppet is to a puppeteer. This is a problem because if the mind could “act” on the body, or if the body could “act” on the mind, then this would dissolve the substantial nature of the attributes. If one attribute can be conceived as the effect of another attribute then it follows that the attribute is not conceived through itself, but through something else. Therefore, “the body cannot determine the mind to thinking, and the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else).”⁵⁰⁴ Contrary to the misanthropy that some may (mis)perceive in Spinoza’s denial of freewill, it is actually a blessing and a cornerstone of his idea of human freedom. Spinoza’s argument is that forcing others to think through physical force is as impossible and fictitious an idea as its telekinetic opposite. The irony is that the notion of a freewill reduces the idea of the body to a passive vessel such that the freedom of mind would involve the slavery of the body. But it is only insofar as we attribute necessary determinations to both body and mind such that neither is ancillary to the other that we can conceive both body and mind to constitute a wholly *sovereign* individual.

Spinoza’s problem with the idea of a “freewill” is thus that it gives us only a partial and inadequate idea of what a human being is. Not only is the idea of freewill the consequent of an entirely erroneous premise but it also fails to express *what a mind can do*, and therefore what a mind *is*. Spinoza consistently argues that concepts are actions that the mind performs because it is a thing that thinks,⁵⁰⁵ whereas perceptions or representations are passions of the mind that

⁵⁰⁴ EIIP2.

⁵⁰⁵ “By idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing. Exp.: *I say concept rather than perception, because the word perception seems to indicate that the mind is acted on by the object. But concept seems to express an action of the mind.*” EIID3.

indicate more about the constitution of our own body than that of the affecting one.⁵⁰⁶ Ideas therefore express the mind's self-determining power to think, whereas perceptions and representations express the actions of external things that the mind suffers. Even so, however, passions are in minimal way a kind of action. After all, it is not the tree that represents itself to me but rather my mind that represents the extended presence of the tree in its attribute or power of thought. Passions therefore still refer to a capacity or a power, but only in the most minimal and basic way that expresses a power to be acted on by something else.

The idea of the will is thus an inadequate idea that people form in their mind because they represent to themselves, that is, they *perceive* “their volitions and their appetite, [but] do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing.”⁵⁰⁷ But since the human mind is only minimally a representing thing and maximally a thinking thing,⁵⁰⁸ the representations involved in the idea of freewill express only the bare minimum of what a mind can do. The idea of freewill is, for Spinoza, simply the unconscious idea that minds have of their appetites, desires, and actions insofar as they consider those appetites, desires, and actions in isolation from the multiplicity of natural causes. But since ideas are not simple images or pictures that are traced into the otherwise blankness of a mind,⁵⁰⁹ we cannot “will” something contrary to the causal affirmations and negations that ideas involve.⁵¹⁰ Spinoza's reasoning here

⁵⁰⁶ “So long as the human mind *perceives* things from the common order of Nature, it does not have an adequate but only a confused and mutilated knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies. For the mind does not know itself except insofar as it perceives ideas of the affections of the body. But it does not perceive its own body except through the very ideas themselves of the affections, and it is also through them alone that it perceives external bodies.” EIIIP29cor. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰⁷ EI Appendix.I.

⁵⁰⁸ “Man thinks or, to put it differently, we know that we think.” EIIA2.

⁵⁰⁹ Spinoza therefore denies the empiricist thesis of *tabula rasa*.

⁵¹⁰ “Indeed, those who think that ideas consist in images which are formed in us from encounters with [NS: external] bodies, are convinced that those ideas of things [NS: which can make no trace in our brains, or] of which we can

is that because the idea of a thing does not occur independently of the affirmations and negations, actions and passions, that the thing involves and expresses, what we call ideas are nothing other than an intellectual assemblage of the same affirmations and negations, agreements and disagreements, that extended modes involve and express. In other words, the affirmations and negations that define a particular thing are expressed identically whether they are conceived under the attribute of Thought or Extension.

Spinoza gives an example of the idea of a triangle which cannot be thought without simultaneously affirming the existence a thing whose three angles are equal to two right angles. If a triangle is thought, then so too is the affirmation of a thing whose angles are equal to two right angles, and if one is removed then so too is the other.⁵¹¹ “So this affirmation pertains to the essence of the idea of the triangle and is nothing beyond it. And what we have said concerning this volition (since we have selected it at random), must also be said concerning any volition, namely, that it is nothing apart from the idea.”⁵¹² Therefore, if an idea does not occur except within certain limits (affirmations and negations), however adequately or inadequately those limits may be defined, it follows that “the will and the intellect are one and the same.”⁵¹³ In other words, the idea of the will and the idea of the intellect share an identical essence because we cannot will something contrary to the affirmations and negations that ideas involve. If the

form no similar image [NS: in our brain] are not ideas, but only fictions which we feign from a free choice of the will. They look on ideas, therefore, as mute pictures on a panel, and preoccupied with this prejudice, do not see that an idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or negation.” EIIP49schol.II.

⁵¹¹ “Let us conceive, therefore, some singular volition, say a mode of thinking by which the mind affirms that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. This affirmation involves the concept, or the idea, of the triangle, that is, it cannot be conceived without the idea of the triangle. For to say that A must involve the concept of B is the same as to say that A cannot be conceived without B. Further, this affirmation also cannot be without the idea of the triangle. Therefore, this affirmation can neither be nor be conceived without the idea of the triangle.” EIIP49dem.

⁵¹² EIIP49demI.

⁵¹³ EIIP49cor.

affirmations and negations that constitute the idea of one thing are removed in the intellect, then so too is the possibility of its volition.

This identity of the intellect and the will means that the suspension of judgement in the mind is as impossible as it is to suspend an effect from its causes in corporeal nature. “For the will, like all other things, requires a cause by which it is determined to exist and produce an effect in a certain way. And although from a given will, or intellect infinitely many things may follow, [even] God still cannot be said, on that account, to act from freedom of the will, any more than he can be said to act from freedom of motion and rest on account of those things that follow from motion and rest.”⁵¹⁴ Really then, since there are no suspended causes or effects, “when we say that someone suspends judgment, we are saying nothing but that he sees that he does not perceive the thing adequately. Suspension of judgment, therefore, is really a perception, not [an act] of free will.”⁵¹⁵ Hence, the ideas that follow from a given intellect or will are “to this or that volition as ‘stone-ness’ is to this or that stone, or man to Peter or Paul.”⁵¹⁶ Spinoza’s ideas of desire and appetite must therefore be distinguished from the inadequate idea of voluntary will. Spinoza thinks we should understand the idea of “will” not as a faculty of decisive volition, but rather as the “the faculty by which the mind affirms or denies something true or something false, and not the desire by which the mind wants a thing or avoids it.”⁵¹⁷

Spinoza’s examples might seem strange because the minds of most people are not usually occupied by the ideas of circles and triangles, nor are these things that human beings typically want. Generally speaking, people are much more inclined to think about what they will be

⁵¹⁴ EIP32corII.

⁵¹⁵ EIIP49schol.III.B(ii).

⁵¹⁶ EIIP48schol.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

having for lunch, or what someone recently said, or a task they are about to perform, etc. Thus, Spinoza's examples might seem poorly chosen if his intention was to illustrate the processes of thought as they occur in the mind. For, the argument that thought proceeds through affirmations and negations that the idea of things involves seems contrary to daily experience. Furthermore, the affirmations and negations through which we encounter other complex thinking things are hardly ever as easy to define as the degrees of a triangle or the circumference of a circle. But we should recall that Spinoza does not define a thing's essential singularity from its quantifiable and empirical properties, but rather according to the powers from which it strives to endure. The ideas of things we think are therefore not like the kind of definitions we would find in a dictionary because ideas are not representations that more or less accurately represent a thing according to a predefined model. Ideas, for Spinoza, are intellectual expressions of the affirmations and negations that extended bodies involve. In the case of a triangle, therefore, its essentially *triangular* nature follows necessarily from the kinds of relations that sustain it and these will always depend on the power of its three sides having an equivalent ratio to two right angles. So, we can assume, although not without some generosity, that Spinoza chose these geometric examples due to the relative simplicity that their objective ideas involve such that they can be thought in an identical way by anyone. Although not everyone will know the affirmations and negations that make up a Peter or a Paul, everyone will be able to know the affirmations and negations that make up a triangle or circle.

However, even if the objective essence of a triangle can be thought by anyone in an identical way, that does not mean that everyone always has the same idea of a triangle all the

time.⁵¹⁸ If we define the mind/soul as the idea of the body, as Spinoza does,⁵¹⁹ then every idea, regardless of adequacy, is inevitably accompanied by an affection. So, although the objective definition of a triangle may be universally the same, the affections that accompany its idea will differ moment to moment, person to person. Spinoza's definition of desire and his concept of conatus thus have the significant effect of subverting the traditional relationship between knowledge and affectivity (feeling/experience). Instead of reducing one to the other through a contradictory opposition, Spinoza posits a simultaneity in which knowledge and affection always occur together. If, therefore, we extend the identity of intellect and will to the simultaneity of knowledge and affection, it follows that "the idea of any thing that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our body's power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our mind's power of thinking."⁵²⁰ So even adequate ideas are not exempt from the influence of affects. On the contrary, the more adequate ideas we develop then the more joyful we should become. For, honing our adequate ideas is what constitute our transition from lesser to greater perfection, the affection of which is joy itself.⁵²¹ This means that the more adequate ideas a mind can think then the greater its power of perseverance (conatus) will be. For, the greater a mind's power of understanding then the greater its power of action is, and the less it can be acted on and destroyed by external causes.⁵²²

⁵¹⁸ "Different men can be affected differently by one and the same object; and one and the same man can be affected differently at different times by one and the same object." EIIIP51.

⁵¹⁹ EIIIP13.

⁵²⁰ EIIIP11.

⁵²¹ "Joy is a man's passage from a lesser to a greater perfection." EIII Definition of the Affects.II.

⁵²² "The more an affect is known to us, then, the more it is in our power, and the less the mind is acted on by it." EVP3cor. See also: "The more the mind understands things by the second and third kind of knowledge, the less it is acted on by affects which are evil, and the less it fears death." EVP38.

Every idea is thus always already accompanied by affects of joy or sadness and their derivatives which tend to occur in ambivalent and vacillating mixtures. We should think of our power to think, therefore, not as inner representations, nor as computational deductions of empirical properties, but as a vast network of affirmations, negations, and the psychosomatic associations that existing things involve. In this way, one of Spinoza's greatest contributions to modern thought is to have eliminated traditional hierarchies between body and mind:

For indeed, no one has yet determined *what the body can do*, that is, experience has not yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone, insofar as Nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the mind. For no one has yet come to know the structure of the body so accurately that he could explain all its functions – not to mention that many things are observed in the lower animals which far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many things in their sleep which they would not dare to awake. This shows well enough that the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its mind wonders at.⁵²³

If therefore bodies involve their own determinations and ideas are always already affective, regardless of their adequacy, there is simply no reason to add to an action the idea of a will that masters and enslaves the body to its intentions in order for ideas to become actionable. Every idea is always already an action because it is the very essence of a mind *to think*. Therefore, in

⁵²³ EIIIP2schol. Emphasis added.

every modification of thought we necessarily think and know *something* even if it is only in the weakest sense possible of knowing *that* we think without knowing *what* it is we are thinking.⁵²⁴

The question is not so much what do *you* or *I* think since there is no you or I willing the thoughts we think. Spinoza would suggest that the question ought rather to be under what conditions do specific thoughts occur? Thought does not overdetermine the causes of Nature, but is itself immersed in and expressed by them. “From this it follows that man is necessarily always subjected to passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and *accommodates* himself to it as much as the nature of things requires.”⁵²⁵ Therefore, the thoughts with which we strive to persevere in our being are inextricable from the conditions in which they *are* thought, and so would not otherwise exist outside of those conditions. But even if the contents of thought are not determined by the dictates of a legislator, that does not mean they do not correspond to an effort, intensity, or *desire* according to which thinking individuals strive to exist. The value and function of Spinoza’s theory of conatus therefore is to demonstrate that the alternative is not between conceiving the body as the mind’s puppet or the mind as the body’s shadow precisely because there really is no alternative, mind and body are simply the same thing expressed in two different ways. Freedom of body and mind, for Spinoza, is thus not a capitulation and resignation to the fated powers that be, as it is for the Stoics. Freedom, for Spinoza, is an active and joyful striving to become the individual that each human being essentially is.

⁵²⁴ Balibar notes that on this issue “Spinoza clearly anticipates Freud, whose doctrine is characterised less by the importance it places on affectivity than by the importance it places on the role of thought in affectivity.” *Spinoza and Politics*, 109.

⁵²⁵ EIVP4cor. Emphasis added.

Conclusion

Communication as an Ethics of Interpretation

In this concluding chapter I show how Spinoza's ontological argument (and the paradox of singularity that it implies) facilitates what Etienne Balibar describes in *Spinoza and Politics* as a theory of communication. I argue that when Balibar's theory of communication is considered in light of Spinoza's ontological argument, it is better understood as an *ethics of interpretation*. Balibar argues that "the whole of Spinoza's philosophy, insofar as it makes metaphysics inseparable from politics (this unity or reciprocal presupposition being precisely what is meant by an 'ethic'), can be understood as a highly original philosophy of communication."⁵²⁶ He locates this philosophy of communication in the physical digression in part two of the *Ethics* where Spinoza sketched the basic principles of a physical treatise. According to Balibar, the lemmas, axioms, and postulates of this brief physical treatise correspond to the psycho-somatic transitions between activity and passivity that qualify and determine individuals in their striving to preserve their being. In this light, Spinoza's philosophy can be described as a philosophy of *the modes of communication* "in which the theory of knowledge and the theory of sociability are closely intertwined."⁵²⁷ Given this inseparability, Balibar argues that the three kinds of knowledge that Spinoza defines and analyzes in the *Ethics* corresponds to "a way of establishing the necessary link between the preservation of individuals and the institution of community."⁵²⁸ Balibar's theory of communication posits that for every way or "mode" of thinking and knowing there exist corresponding modes of material exchange that establish and preserve a body-politic

⁵²⁶ Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 99.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵²⁸ Balibar, *Spinoza, the Transindividual*, 68.

as a particular *regime of communication*.⁵²⁹ So, by *communication* Balibar understands the dynamic ideational and material exchanges in which individuals of varying complexity are sustained, changed, or destroyed.⁵³⁰ Balibar's reading is particularly valuable to Spinoza studies because it provides unique insight into the paradoxical simultaneity in which Spinoza conceives activity and passivity. The idea is also valuable as a political theory because it offers a way to relate individuality and collectivity without the binary opposition between untethered atomism or an all-encompassing monolith. The theory instead conceives both the individual and the collective to relate through the dynamics of an on-going construct or endeavor.⁵³¹ Regardless of how complex and composite, therefore, to be an individual is to be constructed through a myriad of relations to other singular things and the contexts that they occupy. Individuals and collectives are therefore constructed, preserved, and destroyed in identical situations. I consider Balibar to be a leading scholar in this area of the literature, but he does not consider how Spinoza's paradox of the ontological argument figures into an otherwise Spinozistic theory of communication. Thus, I shall argue that Spinoza's ontological argument for the necessary existence of God facilitates the theory of communication through an *ethics of interpretation*. Given such an ethic,

⁵²⁹ "Passion and reason are both, in the final analysis, modes of communication between bodies and between ideas of bodies. In the same way, political regimes should be thought of as orders of communication: some of them are conflictual and unstable, others are coherent and stable. Or rather, in some of them the conflictual aspect tends to overwhelm their coherence, while in others coherence tends to prove stronger than the pull of conflict." Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 93.

⁵³⁰ "When an individual is passive, it is because his soul has been subjugated by the circulation of the affects and by the 'general ideas' that inhabit the collective imagination . . . His body too will have been simultaneously subjugated by the unrestrained influence of all the surrounding bodies. When an individual is active, there is on the contrary a coherent order structuring the encounters between his body and other bodies, and the ideas that are in his soul follow on from one another according to 'common notions' . . . *In both cases, we are dealing with modes of communication: the very form in which individuality takes is thus the result of a given mode of communication.*" Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 94. Emphasis in original.

⁵³¹ "[Spinoza's idea of singularity] has nothing to do with atomistic individualism: to say that all individuals are different (or, better, that they act and suffer in different ways) is not to say that they can be isolated from one another . . . It is the relationship of each individual to other individualities and their reciprocal actions and passions which determine the form of the individual's desire and actuate its power. Singularity is a trans-individual function. It is a function of communication." *Ibid.*, 108.

individuals strive to interpret others as they would have others interpret themselves and thereby construct a principle or standard in which and through which the differences that singularize them are realized and affirmed. Otherwise, communication remains a passive enterprise dominated by inadequate and superstitious ideas of imaginary similarity.

Spinoza's social epistemology holds that the possibility of mutual understanding presupposes the communicability of an absolute good through which diverse individuals cohere and commune.⁵³² This good would be "absolute" in the sense that it would have to be good in-itself, and thus not an instrumental good which is good for something else. The good as such is both the condition in which and end for which this coherence and community is desirable in and for itself. In this way, the socio-political construction of individuality is a consequence of the various ways in which *the good* is conceived, pursued, and exchanged. But as we have seen throughout this study, the idea of the good can be conceived, pursued and exchanged in ways that are contrary if not opposed. As a result, the kinds of individuals that certain modes of communication express can also be opposed, contrary, and generally incompatible. For, individuals pursue the idea of the good "both insofar as the mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas..."⁵³³ How then can two individuals, or even one and the same individual, establish common understandings if the mode of thinking through which they strive to understand are incompatible? How we answer this depends on how we relate adequate and inadequate ideas. If the difference between the adequate and the inadequate is absolute then so

⁵³² "After experience had taught me that all things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile . . . I resolved at last to try and find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself [*verum bonum, et sui communicabile*], and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected – whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity." TEI.1.

⁵³³ EIIIP9.

too is their incompatibility, and thus communication between those of a contrary mind would be impossible.

To understand the way that Spinoza relates adequate and inadequate ideas we should return to his doctrine of conatus since the striving to preserve in existence intertwines his theory of action with his theory of knowledge. As we have seen, Spinoza argues that the mind's power of action is not determined by a voluntary faculty of will but by the adequacy of its ideas. Our desires, therefore, do not follow from our judgements, conversely, our judgements follow from our desires. "We neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything *because we judge it to be good*; on the contrary, we judge something to be good *because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it.*"⁵³⁴ However, this poses a problem for a theory of communication because it seems to suggest that the communication of the good and the kinds of individuality that mode of communication can express are determined in advance without an active role for the striving individuals. But if individuals are not active participants in their communications, then they are also not active participants in their own individuality. As a result, the conditions in which they compose agreements or disagreements will be arbitrary and subject to chance. And, if both the causes from which and the ends for which individuals communicate are passively determined, then Spinoza's theory of communication would involve a very weak notion of freedom. Hence, there is a socio-political problem implied in the interpretation of Spinoza's argument that "the will and the intellect are one and the same."⁵³⁵

If we refuse to give up the conventional idea of the "will" as an uncaused subjective faculty of volition, then the way Spinoza conflates the idea of intellect, appetite, and desire will

⁵³⁴ EIIIP9schol. Emphasis added.

⁵³⁵ EIIP49cor.

seem to render mutual understanding extremely rare if not impossible. For, if what we think (intellect) is identical to what we will, and the will is conceived as a faculty of volition, then cooperation and mutual understanding presuppose a chance resemblance of appetites and ideas between individuals. In other words, if the intellect is identical to the will, then cooperation and mutual understanding presuppose that the communicating individuals *want* the same thing and therefore have the same *ideas*. Otherwise, the individuals do not “so concur in one action” according to which Spinoza defines singular things,⁵³⁶ and if they do it is only in the most minimal sense possible. But this renders political praxis, that is, “the striving on the part of individuals to bring about *rationally* those actions to which they are usually determined by their passions,”⁵³⁷ meaningless because the rational good would be indistinguishable from the passionate good. Thus, the problem is that if individuals cannot agree except with others who already share their appetites, then the concurrence of actions on which their individuality depends will be so thoroughly homogenous and redundant that they would not be able to survive encounters that compel their parts to adapt and take on new relations. Gladly, however, this is only a problem if we refuse to give up the idea of the will as a subjective faculty of volition that facilitates communication (and therefore individuality) through the inadequate idea of a voluntary cause or “freewill.”⁵³⁸

It is only if we can distinguish between will/intellect (the affirmations and negations that ideas involve) and desire (the force by which we pursue or are repelled by a thing) that we can

⁵³⁶ EIID7.

⁵³⁷ Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 96.

⁵³⁸ Otherwise, individuality, as such, would not exist outside of the echo chambers that recognize and reaffirm the arbitrary contingencies of the imaginary identity categories that passively individualize a given person.

adequately know what we desire, and actively desire what we know.⁵³⁹ If the will were identical to desire we would have to think about communication like a game of broken telephone in which every communication would be corrupted and reduced to the contingency of affect and appetite. For, there would be neither an idea of the active nor the passive since every communication would be inseparable from our bondage to the power of external things. Alternatively, if we follow Spinoza in conflating the will and the intellect, and conceive desire as the expression of human conatus, then it follows that the communication of an absolute good, and therefore individuality itself, presupposes an active effort on the part of its participants. I call this effort an *ethics of interpretation*. For, since no two individuals share entirely identical appetites or passions since no two individuals share one body and mind, the communicability of the good for which they strive depends on their ability to discover the affirmations and negations (the ideas) in which their actions so concur. The paradox, as we will see, is that the human essence, nature, or conatus is only useful, good, and communicable according to the differences of its expression, and this renders cooperation an exercise in mutual interpretation.

Spinoza's theory of conatus posits that we can discover the essence of a singular thing by discovering the actions that persevere its being and most actively accommodate it to the conditions in which it exists.⁵⁴⁰ We know then that for Spinoza the essence of things is not determined negatively through what they lack, but positively through the affirmation of the actual limits in which they exist. For, since singular things are for Spinoza "modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way . . . no thing has anything in

⁵³⁹ Will and intellect are thus conflated as the "faculty by which the mind affirms or denies something true or something false, and not the desire by which the mind wants a thing or avoids it." EIIP48schol.

⁵⁴⁰ "Each thing, as far as it can, strives to persevere in its being." EIIP6.

itself by which it can be destroyed, *or* which takes its existence away.”⁵⁴¹ Otherwise, God/substance would contain something in itself that could take its own existence away, and therefore existence itself would not involve necessity. Therefore, Spinoza argues that, considered in itself, every singular thing intrinsically tends to preserve its being, and the relations that dissolve or destroy it are extrinsic to the essential relations that sustain and define them.⁵⁴² “For the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, *or* it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away.”⁵⁴³ It follows then that things which are of a contrary nature “cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other.”⁵⁴⁴ Otherwise, there would be something in one and the same subject or definition that could dissolve itself.

Yet, this argument that the essence of singular things is necessarily affirmative is complicated by Spinoza’s earlier argument in the *Ethics* that bodies do not exist in a natural vacuum without relations to other bodies.⁵⁴⁵ For, without a separating vacuum, bodies are inevitably mixed together such that the duration of their being is passively determined in their contingent encounters with other bodies that can either destroy or empower them. And given the infinite extension that Spinoza attributes to substance, it follows that “there is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given,

⁵⁴¹ EIIIP6dem.

⁵⁴² “No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause.” EIIIP4.

⁵⁴³ EIIIP4dem.

⁵⁴⁴ EIIIP5.

⁵⁴⁵ “For if corporeal substance could be so divided that its parts were really distinct, why, then, could one part not be annihilated, the rest remaining connected with one another as before? And why must they all be so fitted together with one another as before? Truly, of things which are really distinct from one another, one can be, and remain in its condition, without the other. Since, therefore, there is no vacuum in Nature (a subject I discuss elsewhere), but all its parts must so concur that there is no vacuum, it follows also that they cannot be really distinguished, that is, that corporeal substance, insofar as it is a substance, cannot be divided.” EIP15schol.IV.

there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed.”⁵⁴⁶ So, on the one hand, an adequate idea of the essence or definition of a singular thing is completely free from extrinsic negation. But, on the other hand, every existing body is inextricable from its relations to an infinity of other existing bodies that compose and dissolve it.⁵⁴⁷ We can infer from these ontological principles at least two aspects regarding the nature of communication. Firstly, every actually existing body is constituted by a mixture of agreements and disagreements. Therefore, no singular thing is totally active or passive but comprises a multitude of actions and passions and its duration naturally transitions between them. Second, nothing can persevere in its being alone without relations to external things. The most any thing can do in its effort to persevere is to seek out other compatible things with which it can form agreements that accommodate its existence in a way that obstructs or at least mitigates those things that tend toward its destruction.

For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To [the human being], then, there is nothing more useful than [other human beings]. [The human], I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of [their] being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁶ EIVA1.

⁵⁴⁷ It may seem here as though Spinoza has installed a contradiction into the very essence or definition of corporeal substance insofar as a body can destroy another body, but this confuses the definition of corporeal modes with extended substance itself. Spinoza reminds readers in the *Ethics*' physical digression that “if we proceed in this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual.” EIIIL7dem. Thus, considered as a whole, the attribute of extension is not dissolved by its own definition.

⁵⁴⁸ EIVP18schol.

Spinoza's ontology thus centers on the functions of composition, accommodation, and dissolution, and their relation is precisely what establishes the *problem of communication* and also the *necessity of interpretation*. For, if the powers with which and the conditions in which individuals communicate determine the stability and resilience of their communications, then it follows that the most durable regimes of communication are those with the greatest ability to adapt to new bodies and to appropriate their motions into themselves while still retaining their form.⁵⁴⁹ But the question remains – if individuality is *the result* of a given mode of communication, as Balibar argues it is,⁵⁵⁰ how can two individuals who participate in distinct regimes of communication agree on anything? Are they existentially trapped in the modes of communication in which they are arbitrarily individualized and individuated? In other words, if individuality is the *result* of a given mode of communication, then does communication ontologically precede individuality or can individuals actively participate in the processes that determine them even without recourse to the illusion of a freewill?

The difficulty of the problem stems from the diversity of already existing individuals who, having already been individualized in advance by regimes that precede them as individuals, participate in agreements contrary to our own. And, as we have seen, an extrinsically forced agreement between singular things is more a form of bondage than it is a union. But, if disagreements only follow from the relativity of agreement in the first place, then the individual

⁵⁴⁹ “If certain bodies composing an individual are compelled to alter the motion they have from one direction to another, but so that they can continue their motions and communicate them to each other in the same ratio as before, the individual will likewise retain its nature, without any change of form.” EII Physical Digression L6. It follows then that if the bodies composing an individual are compelled to alter their motions *but cannot communicate them in the same ratio as before*, then the individual will be unable to retain its nature. In other words, the more capable an individual is to adapt to the motions of bodies surrounding it while maintaining the ratio in which it exists then the more stable and powerful that individuality is.

⁵⁵⁰ “. . . *the very form in which individuality takes is thus the result of a given mode of communication.*” Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 94.

we happen to be is equally relative and arbitrary, and so there would be nothing necessary or essential in the original disagreement. So, this is not really the source of the problem since the natural mixture of bodies implies that every individual always already contains multitudes of agreements and disagreements. We should recall that no individual is completely active or passive, useful or harmful, but naturally transitions between each end of the spectrum and so must be conceived to involve both at once.⁵⁵¹ So, if we must conceive individuality through the simultaneity of action and passion, then the compatibility of diverse individuals to communicate depends on whether their powers and the conditions in which they are exercised are inclined toward a maximum or a minimum. And, since passions and perceptions constitute the minimum conditions in which human individuals act, while adequate ideas and concepts constitute the maximum,⁵⁵² it follows that each individual is singularized as *this* individual according to their unique mixture or ratio of action and passion.⁵⁵³ At any point in their duration, therefore, it is the unique mixture of actions and passions that singularizes an individual's essence in its transition to greater or lesser perfection.⁵⁵⁴ And, since things of a contrary nature cannot be in the same subject, "if two contrary actions are aroused in the same subject, a change will have to occur,

⁵⁵¹ "The first thing which constitutes the essence of the mind is nothing but the idea of an actually existing body; this idea is composed of many others, of which some are adequate, and others inadequate." EIIP3dem.

⁵⁵² "I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is, when something in us or outside follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause." EIID2.

⁵⁵³ "Desire is man's very essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something . . . For by an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence, whether it is innate [NS: or has come from outside], whether it is conceived through the attribute of thought alone, or through the attribute of extension alone, or is referred to both at once." EIII Definition of the Affects.

⁵⁵⁴ ". . . the mind can undergo great changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection. These passions, indeed, explain to us the affects of joy and sadness. By *joy*, therefore, I shall understand in what follows *that passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection*. And by *sadness*, that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection." EIIP11schol.

either in both of them, or in one only, until they cease to be contrary.”⁵⁵⁵ The dynamics of this change thus reflect the transition to greater or lesser perfection constitutive of an individual’s singularity.

With this model of communication, we can understand why some forms of individuality are inherently unstable and prone to conflict, while others are generally stable and widely compatible. If the limits constitutive of an individual are predominantly preserved through passive affects, then the bondage of their “union” will inevitably dissolve and scatter into other communities given an encounter with some other affect of a contrary and more powerful nature.⁵⁵⁶ For example, humans may cohere into social groups based on the common passion that they fear a common master or enemy. And since there is in nature always a more powerful singular thing, the vacillation of passions is only a matter of time. So, individuals that are predominantly inclined towards a minimum of action or that preserve themselves predominantly through the inadequate ideas that passions involve express a good that affords relatively weak coalitions. Alternatively, individuals that preserve their union predominantly through the actions that adequate ideas involve express a common good that is equally in the part and in the whole, and therefore affords a far more resilient and stable power of individuality. Therefore, the greatest good that we can desire is a universal compatibility of communication. In other words:

[Human beings] can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of [their] being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to

⁵⁵⁵ EVA1.

⁵⁵⁶ “An affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained.” EIVP7.

preserve their being; and all that, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.⁵⁵⁷

If, therefore, we want to know how we can most actively participate in the communicative processes in which we are individualized, we have to know the conditions in which the greatest number can resiliently and coherently “concur in one action.”⁵⁵⁸ For, “the more an affect arises from a number of causes concurring together, the greater it is.”⁵⁵⁹ And we have already seen Spinoza argue that human beings are active to the extent to which they think – that is, *perceive*, *reason*, and *intuit*.⁵⁶⁰ It follows then that human beings most actively participate in the communicative processes through which they are individualized to the extent to which the greatest number strive to understand and perfect the conditions of their collective action.⁵⁶¹

Yet, the testimony of contemporary experience still begs the question – given the enormous plurality of individual human beings and the diversity of goods for which they strive, how is it possible to establish the conditions of a general agreement that incorporates them all? “For although human bodies agree in many things, they still differ in very many. And for that reason what seems good to one, seems bad to another; what seems ordered to one, seems confused to another; what seems pleasing to one, seems displeasing to another, and so on.”⁵⁶² For example, “the greedy man judges an abundance of money best, and poverty worst. The ambitious

⁵⁵⁷ EIVP18schol.

⁵⁵⁸ EIID2.

⁵⁵⁹ EVP8.

⁵⁶⁰ EIIP40schol.2.

⁵⁶¹ “The idea of any thing that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our body’s power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our minds power of thinking.” EIIP11.

⁵⁶² EI Appendix.

man desires nothing so much as esteem and dreads nothing so much as shame. To the envious nothing is more agreeable than another's unhappiness, and nothing more burdensome than another's happiness. And so, each one, from his own affect, judges a thing good or bad, useful or useless."⁵⁶³ We return to the problem in which communication seems to break into a game of broken-telephone as soon as we try to actually conceive or define the transmission of an absolute good on which communication depends. For, the most anyone can do to participate in the communicative processes that individualize them is to seek out a maximum of others with whom they can unify while striving to understand and perpetuate the conditions of that unity. But what if those of a greedy, ambitious, or envious nature are the only available individuals with whom to unify? Would not such a lonely individual be unable to persevere in their being?

The question assumes that a given individual is totalized by the affections under which their body and mind are currently modified, but we know this is not the case for Spinoza. Given the doctrine of conatus, we know that Spinoza argues that human beings are singularized by the dynamics of their desire. In other words, the human individual is constituted through *dynamic ratios* of action and passion. Therefore, no individual is totally identical with the affections that modify their singular essence because that essence constantly transitions between more or less activity, greater or lesser perfection. Even if this ratio of activity to passivity of the mind as it corresponds to the ratio of motion and rest of the body can never be grasped in its totality, its general inclination is indicated by the ideas of the affections of an individual's transition to greater or lesser perfection.⁵⁶⁴ So if no singular thing is totally active or passive but comprises a

⁵⁶³ EIIP39schol.

⁵⁶⁴ "When I say *a greater or lesser force of existing than before*, I do not understand that the mind compares its body's present constitution with a past constitution, but that the idea which constitutes the form of the affect affirms of the body something which really involves more or less of reality than before. And because the essence of the mind consists in this, that it affirms the actual existence of its body, and we understand by perfection the very essence of the thing, it follows that the mind passes to a greater or lesser perfection when it happens that it affirms of

multitude of each such that its essence naturally transitions between them, then we should apply this principle upstream to the various regimes of communication themselves. If we do, it follows that communication occurs through indefinite processes that dynamically transition between more or less coherence and cohesion. This means that no communication is ever *complete* if there is always something that can be added or taken away.⁵⁶⁵ The inverse, however, is equally true. That is, the universal mixture of bodies also means that no communication begins *ex nihilo*. For, if all bodies are naturally mixed together without a vacuum, and all bodies communicate their motions to all the others but in degrees of more or less,⁵⁶⁶ then communication has always already begun even if only in the most infinitesimal way. All bodies have something in common.⁵⁶⁷ Therefore, if two bodies encounter and affect one another then they do so only through what they have in common, even if their encounter does not tend towards the composition of an agreement.⁵⁶⁸ Communication alone, therefore, is insufficient to establish the desire for mutual accommodation and concurrent action that stable unions involve. There must also be a present tendency towards the composition of agreements that facilitates mutual accommodation and cooperation. The question then is not whether it is possible to communicate

its body (or some part of the body) something which involves more or less reality than before. So when I said above that the mind's power of thinking is increases or diminished, I meant nothing but that the mind has formed of its body (or some part of it) an idea which expresses more or less reality than it had affirmed of the body." EIII General Definition of the Affects. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶⁵ One of the crowning achievements of the first part of the *Ethics* is to convincingly demonstrate the impossibility of final-causes in nature. Efforts of communication are therefore no exception.

⁵⁶⁶ "A body which moves or is at rest must be determined to motion or rest by another body, which has also been determined to motion or rest by another, and that again by another, and so on, to infinity." EIII3.

⁵⁶⁷ "All bodies, even those that do not agree with one another (for example, a poison and the body that is poisoned), have something in common: extension, motion and rest." Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (1970; reis. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 55.

⁵⁶⁸ "Any singular thing whose nature is entirely different from ours can neither aid nor restrain our power of acting, and absolutely, no thing can be either good or evil for us, unless it has something in common with us." EIVP29.

with greedy, ambitious, or envious individuals both because they are not always so, and also because affecting bodies always already have something in common that facilitates their mutual affectivity. Instead, we should ask how can we incline the conditions of a communication so that its members transition towards a maximum of action and a minimum of passion?

So far, we know that, for Spinoza, human individuals are singularized by dynamic ratios of actions and passions that transition between a greater or lesser perfection of their human essence (desire). Hence, we should not interpret Spinoza's theory of action and passion through a logic of binary opposition that would posit every passion as the binary correlate of an action, and vice versa. Since individuals are by definition (paradoxically) finite, there is a simultaneity in which actions and passions always occur together. Actions and passions are simply kinds of causal relations, one of which follows from our immanent nature and so can be understood in itself,⁵⁶⁹ the other of which follows from "the power of an external cause compared with our own."⁵⁷⁰ Actions and passions are therefore not opposites but constitutive elements of a relation that occur together in degrees of more or less.⁵⁷¹ This is important because it means that when we are considering how to intervene in the communications of which we are a part, we should not conceive the activity of one individual to imply the passivity of another. If we did, then the accommodative ideal of communication would be impossible since one mind would act only to the extent that the other suffered a passion.

⁵⁶⁹ EIIID2.

⁵⁷⁰ EIVP5.

⁵⁷¹ "All modes by which a body is affected by another body follow both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body, so that one and the same body may be moved differently according to differences in the nature of the bodies moving it. And conversely, different bodies may be moved differently by one and the same body." EII Physical Digression, A1".

If the action of one interlocutor involved the passion of the other, individuality in the way that Spinoza defines it would be impossible since then no two individuals could “concur in one action.”⁵⁷² The accommodating ideal would become a moving goalpost since two individuals would never express a concerted action but would instead be playing a constant game of catch-up with no confirmable standard. Therefore, the principle of accommodation must occur through a simultaneous reciprocity of action. Otherwise, the actions of each individual would contradict those of every other individual since the good, power, and action of the one would involve the bad, impotence, and passivity of the other. Conceived in this way, human individuals would have neither a sociable nor singular nature because the ratio of motion to rest of the body and the ratio of activity to passivity of the mind would be so thoroughly dominated by external things that human beings would be practically inert in body and soul. In effect, we would inhabit a world of Socratic ignorance that was saturated in an incommunicable vision of things.⁵⁷³ So, regardless of the differences that persist between individuals, there is always already something in common through which human beings communicate and hone the essential powers that singularize them. Otherwise, we would have to define each thing through the negations that subordinate it to an infinity of external things instead of the necessary affirmations that its own nature involves.

There is thus always something in common in relation to which two human individuals are at least potentially compatible, but it is not yet clear how to direct agreements and common understandings in light of that commonality. For, although all bodies share some common attributes and properties, obviously not all bodies agree. On the contrary, some mixtures are mutually corrosive such that their parts dissolve and take on new forms, while others seem to

⁵⁷² EIID7.

⁵⁷³ See chapter 2 of this study.

have virtually no effect on each other. An inquiry into the conditions in which communicating individuals compose agreements thus requires a distinction between the *different* and the *contrary*.⁵⁷⁴ Although human individuals can be *contrary* to one another insofar as they can be predominantly determined by affects which are passions,⁵⁷⁵ they can never be so different as to have absolutely no effect on each other (regardless of how minimal that affect may sometimes be). “Our power of acting, therefore, however it is conceived, can be determined, and hence aided or restrained, by the power of another singular thing which has something in common with us, and not by the power of a thing whose nature is completely different from ours.”⁵⁷⁶ For, “we call evil . . . what diminishes or restrains our power of acting. So if a thing were evil for us through what it has in common with us, then the thing could diminish or restrain what is has in common with us. But this is absurd.”⁵⁷⁷ It is absurd, as we have already seen, because “no thing can be destroyed except through an external cause.”⁵⁷⁸ Therefore, “the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, *or* better, it is for us, and conversely, the more a thing is useful to us, the more it agrees with our nature.”⁵⁷⁹ That is, the more things agree, the more their power of action is increased. So, if we desire to maximize the compatibility of our communications, then we should strive to discover the ways in which we are most useful to others and the ways in which others are most useful to us. In other words, the good at which communicating individuals

⁵⁷⁴ “Any singular thing whose nature is entirely different from ours can neither aid nor restrain our power of acting, and absolutely, no thing can be either good or evil for us, unless it has something in common with us.” EIVP29.

⁵⁷⁵ EIVP34.

⁵⁷⁶ EIVP29dem.

⁵⁷⁷ EIVP30dem.

⁵⁷⁸ EIIIP4. “This proposition is evident through itself. For the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, *or* posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it.” EIIIP4dem.

⁵⁷⁹ EIVP31cor.

should aim is that which follows from the common. If, however, we should desire to be most useful to others and for others to be most useful to us as individuals, then Spinoza's emphasis on the common cannot be understood as an emphasis on the general, as if the idea of the common were a statistical compromise. Spinoza's idea of the common does not refer to *general* idea of something, or to an abstract umbrella term that would neutralize the differences of the things that fall under it. On the contrary, the *common* refers to a mutually shared power from which the differences that singularize a thing can be expressed.

To demonstrate the thesis that the good follows from the common and not the privational, Spinoza offered an example that suggests the contrary, namely the idea of proprietary goods whose ownership excludes others. It might seem at first that two individuals who desire the same thing, and so have something in common, would then be natural enemies since only one can possess it at the exclusion of the other. But Spinoza argues that the cause of their enmity is really that their bodies are currently modified by the influence of contrary affections but otherwise affirm the primary capacity to be affected by the same object in an identical way.⁵⁸⁰ Thus, although we are finite beings that inevitably have appetites for finite goods that can only be enjoyed at the exclusion of others, it is not the exclusivity itself from which their goodness follows. For to exclude is to negate, and for Spinoza negation is always a function of impotence and lack. Therefore, the exclusivity of proprietary goods does not challenge Spinoza's thesis that the good is predicated on the common because exclusivity and privation follow only from the

⁵⁸⁰ "I have said that Paul hates Peter because he imagines that Peter possesses what Paul himself also loves. At first glance it seems to follow from this that these two are injurious to one another because they love the same thing, and hence, because they agree in nature . . . But if we are willing to examine the matter fairly, we shall see that all these propositions are completely consistent . . . the cause of their enmity is nothing but the fact that (as we suppose) they disagree in nature. For we suppose that Peter has the idea of a thing he loves which is already possessed, whereas Paul has the idea of a thing he loves which is lost. That is why the one is affected with joy and the other with sadness, and to that extent [only] they are contrary to one another." EIVP34schol.

negations that inadequate ideas and passions involve.⁵⁸¹ For Spinoza, it is precisely the incompleteness, partiality, and exclusivity on which the inadequacy of inadequate ideas is predicated.⁵⁸² Thus, the good cannot be predicated on the privation that passions involve because “things which are said to agree in nature are understood to agree in power [*potentia*], but not in lack of power, *or* negation, and consequently not in passion either.”⁵⁸³ This is self-evident because if negation is made the principle of an agreement as a common property that they both lack then this is really to say that there is no agreement. For example, if black and white agree only in the fact that neither is red then this is really to say that they agree in nothing, since nothing is commonly affirmed in the pretense of their agreement.⁵⁸⁴ Instead, we should understand that black and white agree in the affirmation that both are certain modifications of the essence of light in its affected interactions with other bodies. Clearly, this is not *despite* the differences (or contrarities) that distinguish black and white since they are in fact consequences of the primary affirmation of which they are. How then can we carry this logic of affirmation over to the social field?

Spinoza’s example regarding the essential agreement between distinct colours reveals two principles that we can apply to the theory of communication. First, it demonstrates that distinct modes (singular things) can share a common essence. Second, it also demonstrates that

⁵⁸¹ This is precisely why Spinoza is so critical of the ideals of special election in both the TPT and the *Ethics*. See for example TPT3 “Of the vocation of the Hebrews, and whether the gift of prophecy was peculiar to them.” See also EI appendix, EIIP8, EIIP40schol, EIV preface, etc.

⁵⁸² “Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate ideas involve.” EIVP1dem. “. . . then we say that the human mind perceives the thing only *partially, or inadequately*.” EIIP11cor. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸³ EIVP32dem.

⁵⁸⁴ “If someone says that black and white agree only in this, that neither is red, he affirms absolutely that black and white agree in nothing. Similarly, if someone says that a stone and a man agree only in this, that each is finite, lacks power, does not exist from the necessity of its nature, or, finally, is indefinitely surpassed by the power of external causes, he affirms completely that a stone and a man do not agree in anything. For things which agree only in a negation, *or* in what they do not have, really agree in nothing.” EIVP32schol.

we lack an adequate idea of singular things if we define the standard of their agreement through a negation. There is an infinity of things of which black, white, and red are equally *not* and therefore this standard expresses no definite limits through which we can conceive and define them.⁵⁸⁵

The essence of singular things is expressed through the common affirmation of an actual and therefore limited power. But this limit has nothing to do with an imposition or prohibition since these can only be conceived as negations. The limit is simply an apprehension and affirmation of the particular conditions in which the thing exists and the relations this existence presupposes.⁵⁸⁶ To communicate the essence of a singular thing is therefore simply to discover and affirm the limits of a power. And since passions can only be attributed to the mind insofar as it involves a negation or lack,⁵⁸⁷ it is clear that the standard of a communication is not the particular words, images, or signs that are used.⁵⁸⁸ Instead, the standard of communication is the simultaneity of action in which minds think together and their discovery of the affirmations and negations that singular things involve.

⁵⁸⁵ “That thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature. For example, a body is called finite because we always conceive another that is greater. Thus a thought is limited by another thought. But a body is not limited by a thought nor a thought by a body.” EID2.

⁵⁸⁶ See for example Spinoza’s geometric illustration in the scholium of EIP8 that affirms the hypothetical existence of an infinity of rectangles that can be drawn within the defined area of a hypothetical circle. “Now of these infinitely many rectangles let two only, namely, those formed from the segments of lines D and E, exist. Of course their ideas also exist now, not only insofar as they are only comprehended in the idea of the circle, but also insofar as they involve the existence of those rectangles. By this they are distinguished from the other ideas of the other rectangles.” EIIP8schol.

⁵⁸⁷ “We see, then, that the passions are not related to the mind except insofar as it has something which involves a negation, *or* insofar as it is considered as a part of Nature which cannot be perceived clearly and distinctly through itself, without the others.” EIIP3schol.

⁵⁸⁸ Especially since we have seen Spinoza argue in the TPT that “words have a definite meaning only from their *use*.” TPT12.11. Emphasis added.

We can therefore relieve our earlier concern that communication might function through a principle of resemblance as if it were a game of broken-telephone. If communication depended on a principle of resemblance, then two individuals would “agree” only to the extent to which they had similar passions, which is to say to the extent to which they lacked the same ideas. But, as we have seen, if two individuals agree only in a privation or in a common property that they both lack, this is really to say that the two do not agree, and so could concur in one action in only the most minimal, passive way. Spinoza thus warns readers:

. . . to distinguish accurately between an idea, *or* concept, of the mind, and the images of things which 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 accurately enough . . . those who confuse words with the idea, or with the very affirmation which the idea involves, think that they can will something contrary to what they are aware of, when they only affirm or deny with words something contrary to what they are aware of. But these prejudices can easily be put aside by anyone who attends to the nature of thought, which does not at all involve the concept of extension. He will then understand clearly that an idea (since it is a mode of thinking) consists neither in the image of anything, nor in words. For the essence of words and of images is constituted only by corporeal motions, which do not at all involve the concept of thought.⁵⁸⁹

If, therefore, we cannot make this distinction and we strive to communicate predominantly through passive means, that is by relying on the resemblance of words and images, then our power as individuals will remain at a minimum because we will have only a minimal role in the

⁵⁸⁹ EIIIP49schol.II.

causes that we are participating in. Alternatively, if we can make this distinction, then it follows that our compatibility to communicate depends less on the particular words, images, or signs that are used and more on our power to interpret and translate the singular way that words and images are used.

The inability to distinguish between an image and its concept reflects the teleological prejudice of superstition that we encountered in chapter two of this study. For, both “are only modes of imagining, and do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination.”⁵⁹⁰ So we can understand why regimes of communication whose preservation depends on the manipulation of passions are so unstable. For, since bodies are distinct enough that they are not all affected the same way, and even one and the same body can be affected differently,⁵⁹¹ passionate regimes must preserve their union by subjugating and subordinating the vacillating passions of its members in pursuit of that imaginary end. Thus, a minority must keep the majority that participates in and sustains the regime in a state of passivity that prevents it from developing powers that could challenge and subvert the private end for which the minority aims. But this is literally self-defeating because by doing so predominantly passionate regimes destabilize the communicative conditions on which their own perseverance depends.⁵⁹² Thus, the individuals that passionate regimes of communication construct tend to participate in their own

⁵⁹⁰ EI Appendix.

⁵⁹¹ “All modes by which a body is affected by another body follow both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body, so that one and the same body may be moved differently according to differences in the nature of the bodies moving it. And conversely, different bodies may be moved differently by one and the same body.” EII Physical Digression A1”.

⁵⁹² “Those who can manage the business of the state secretly have it absolutely in their ‘power to treat their own citizens as deviously in peace as they treat the enemy in war. That silence is often useful to the state no one can deny. But no one will ever prove that without it the state cannot stand firm . . . And it’s sheer stupidity to wish to avoid a small harm by incurring the greatest evil. But this has always been the song they sing who covet absolute rule for themselves: that it is altogether to the state’s advantage that its affairs be conducted in secret, and other things of this kind. The more these doctrines are cloaked in the mantle of utility, the more threatening the slavery they lead to.” PT VII:29.

preservation only minimally and are easily dissolved. For, besides fear and repression, the force that holds it together is not an active desire for friendship predicated on a sense of mutual utility and advantage, it is a passion that Spinoza calls “imitation of the affects.”⁵⁹³

Spinoza defines affective imitation as an unconscious appetite or desire “which is generated in us from the fact that we imagine others like us to have the same desire.”⁵⁹⁴ Balibar aptly describes this as “a circular process of successive identifications in which I never cease to imagine the Other via my image, and to imagine myself via the Other.”⁵⁹⁵ And this is precisely why I argue that the conatus of passionate modes of communication resembles a game of broken-telephone. For, given their recourse to affective imitation, every transmission is inevitably corrupted in its relay to others who interpret its content through the images of their own superimposed appetites. The good for which they strive is thus an impossible origin, an impression of an impression, a trace of a trace, all of which inevitably refer their content to other impressions and other traces.⁵⁹⁶ But in this case, the meaning of words refers only to other words, utterances to other utterances, and signs to other signs without ever expressing the actual limits in which something is known to exist. In this way, passionate modes of communication

⁵⁹³ EIIIP27schol.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Balibar, *Spinoza the Transindividual*, 62.

⁵⁹⁶ “And from this we clearly understand why the mind, from the thought of one thing, immediately passes to the thought of another, which has no likeness to the first: as, for example, from the thought of the word *pomum* a Roman will immediately pass to the thought of the fruit [viz. an apple], which has no similarity to that articulate sound and nothing in common with it except that the body of the same man has often been affected by these two at the same time, that is, that the man often heard the word *pomum* while he saw the fruit. And in this way, each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one’s association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, and so on. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another.” EIIIP18schol.

tend to recapitulate the teleology and infinite regression of “final-ends” whose contents and Forms are always just beyond human reach.

The question then, is whether the good for which and in which human beings communicate can be conceived not on the basis of a similarity but on the paradoxical affirmation of a common difference. So, what is universally affirmed in the diverse expressions of human singularity and by which that singularity is essentially human? I have argued in every chapter of this study that the answer to this question is to be found in the paradoxical singularity of Spinoza’s ontological argument. After introducing the idea in chapter one, I argued in chapter two that Spinoza, following Descartes, conceives the idea of God as the adequately intuited idea of an absolute whole that is neither deduced nor induced from any external cause. Instead, God’s absolutely unlimited essence necessarily involves an equally absolute power of existence. I argued that, for both Descartes and Spinoza, since the idea of the thinking self is neither deduced nor induced from any standard external to its essential nature, the *cogito* or the *idea of the idea* is a modification of the substantial idea of God.⁵⁹⁷ The primary difference, however, between Descartes and Spinoza on the necessary connection between the idea of God and the idea of the

⁵⁹⁷ “And one certainly ought not to find it strange that God, in creating me, placed this idea within me to be like the mark of the workman imprinted on his work; and it is likewise not essential that the mark shall be something different from the work itself. For from the sole fact that God created me it is most probable that in some way he has placed his image and similitude upon me, and that I perceive this similitude (in which the idea of God is contained) by means of the same faculty by which I perceive myself – that is to say, when I reflect on myself I not only know that I am something incomplete and dependent on another . . . but I also know that He on whom I depend possesses in Himself all the great things towards which I aspire . . .” Descartes, *Meditations*, III, 71.

“The human mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence.” EIIP47. “The human mind has ideas from which it perceives itself, its own body, and external bodies as actually existing. And so it has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence.” EIIP47dem. “From this we see that God’s infinite essence and his eternity are known to all. And since all things are in God and are conceived through God, it follows that we can deduce from this knowledge a great many things which we know adequately . . .” EIIP47schol.

thinking self is that Spinoza decentralizes both God and the self in his thesis of their non-representational unity.⁵⁹⁸

I argued in chapter three that Spinoza's immanent and intuited idea of God is as theological or religious as it is philosophical or reasoned because neither can be justified by any external standard. I argued that Spinoza's idea of *reason* belongs to neither philosophy nor to religion if it cannot paradoxically belong to both at once. Reason, therefore, is not simply the principle of what Spinoza calls mathematical certainty, it is also the principle through which individuals actively participate in their faith through the moral certainty of *caritas*. Hence, I concluded in chapter three that Spinoza's concept of monotheism is necessarily pluralistic because the certainty that true faith involves cannot arise from dogmatic or skeptical methods of interpretation. The golden-rule that expresses the truth of a faith, therefore, is inconceivable outside a plurality of distinct but equally true interpretations. What is true in a religious faith therefore does not simply "allow" for an indefinite variability of its contents, it literally cannot exist without the imaginary accommodation through which it is transmitted.

Finally, in chapter four, I argued that Spinoza's concept of philosophical monism is as paradoxically pluralistic as his idea of monotheism is. I argued that Spinoza's concept of God as a necessary substance with an absolutely infinite power of attribution means that this unity has no meaning so long as we understand it as a numerical distinction. I argued (mostly in agreement) with Macherey that Spinoza's idea of God is realized through an absolute infinity of distinct attributes and that this essentially trivializes any meaningful distinction between monism and pluralism when trying to name or catalogue Spinoza's ideas. Then, after disagreeing with

⁵⁹⁸ This is not the appropriate place to fully consider the relation between Descartes and Spinoza. Let it be known, however, that Spinoza's doctrine of conatus and the conflation of intellect and will that it involves prohibits the centralized subjective intentionality that some interpretations of Descartes' Cogito might imply.

Melamed's interpretation of Spinoza's theory of singularity and individuality, I concluded that these can only be understood on the basis of Spinoza's concept of conatus or, in the case of the human being, *desire*. I have argued in every chapter that the paradoxical singularity of Spinoza's ontological argument for the necessary existence of God is expressed through a diversity of active powers for which and through which human beings strive to persevere in their being. Spinoza's concepts of reason, faith, and conatus all refer to one and the same intuitive power of activity that is realized in different ways.

The paradoxical singularity that I argue relates Spinoza's ideas of reason, faith, and desire (conatus) can be most clearly seen in what he calls the *dictates of reason*.⁵⁹⁹ Although Spinoza describes this as a "dictate," we have seen for Spinoza that there is no such dictator either in the heavens or in the mind. Thus, insofar as an individual understands that the preservation of their being is the principle condition of any utility, reason cannot really be said to "demand" anything if its dictates are desirable for itself without recourse to another thing. Spinoza's idea of reason, faith, and desire all express a power to strive for a good that is as collective as it is particular, and which is therefore perfectly absolute. In other words, it is because the good does not exist outside of communicative action but is identical with it "that [people] who are governed by reason – that is, [people] who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage – want nothing for themselves which they do not desire for other

⁵⁹⁹ "Since reason demands nothing contrary to Nature, it demands that everyone loves himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really lead a man to greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can . . . [But] we can never bring it about that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being, nor that we live without having dealings with things outside us. Moreover, if we consider our mind, our intellect would of course be more imperfect if the mind were alone and did not understand anything except itself. There are, therefore, many things outside us which are useful to us, and on that account to be sought. Of these, we can think of none more excellent than those which agree entirely with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body." EIVP18schol.

[people].”⁶⁰⁰ We see then that the “dictates” of reason involves an identical content to the golden rule of faith – namely, that what is good for other people is indissociably implicated in my own personal good. And, if my perseverance depends on the assistance or utility from which I benefit in so unifying with and accommodating myself to others, then that utility is clearly predicated on a *diversity* (not a *redundancy*) of powers. Therefore, human individuals are most useful to each other, and thus most compatible, precisely to the degree to which their powers *differ* from others and therefore *contribute* to the particular functions that preserve and articulate the transitional dynamics of a whole. Thus, the paradox is that individuals of entirely the same nature can communicate only if they are irreducible to the differences of their affective capacities because it is the effort to interpret these differences that constitutes the communicative process. Or, as Balibar puts it:

To desire the good of others as a function of my own good (and thus to anticipate my own good through the good of others) . . . is therefore in no way to desire that those others should be like me, should act like me and adopt my opinions. On the contrary, it is to desire that they should be different, develop their own powers and know what is of use to them more and more adequately.⁶⁰¹

Although Balibar does not explicitly acknowledge it and even seems to suggest the contrary,⁶⁰² the communicational function of reason and faith are thus identical because they express a desire for identically active efforts.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 110.

⁶⁰² “One might be tempted to think that this way of conceiving the structure of the imagination represents a secularisation and a generalisation of the biblical maxim . . . except that Spinoza also introduces in this transposition the idea of the inherently ambivalent character of passions and processes of identification, which involve not only love but also hatred.” Balibar, *Spinoza the Transindividual*, 61–2. As I indicated in chapter one of this study, I

The paradoxical singularity of Spinoza's ontological argument is thus that there is a universally common essence or reality that all things express, although in degrees of more or less,⁶⁰³ and through which the differences that singularize them are articulated. Singularity has to be expressed through a principle of difference rather than similarity because if something is universally common to everything then it cannot constitute the essence of any one thing in particular.⁶⁰⁴ And, Spinoza is quite explicit about what he thinks is equally in the part as it is in the whole.⁶⁰⁵ Therefore, each individual (mode) is singularised not according to their resemblance to God or substance but according to the differences in the way that this universally common essence is expressed. Post-structuralist authors like Balibar and Deleuze are thus justified in the value they attach to theories of difference, especially when interpreting and drawing from Spinoza's ontology. For example, Deleuze posits that "'what is expressed' has no existence outside its expression, yet bears no resemblance to it,"⁶⁰⁶ and this offers great insight into the paradoxical singularity shown by Spinoza's example of the worm in the blood. The example illustrates that a part (mode) cannot know of its own partiality except in the context of a

entirely agree with Balibar here that the biblical maxim cannot be understood as a kind of imaginary knowledge, but Balibar never returns to this to posit a non-imaginary transindividualism of true religion.

⁶⁰³ "So insofar as we refer all individuals in Nature to this genus, compare them to one another, and find that some have more being, or reality, than others, we say that some are more perfect than others. And insofar as we attribute something to them which involves negation, like a limit, an end, lack of power, and so on, we call them imperfect, because they do not affect our mind as much as those we call perfect, and not because something is lacking in them which is theirs, or because Nature has sinned. For nothing belongs to the nature of anything except what follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause. And whatever follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause happens necessarily." EIV preface.

⁶⁰⁴ "What is common to all things and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any singular thing." EIIP37. Movement and rest, for example, do not constitute the essence of any particular mode since they are common notions that apply indiscriminately to every extended mode.

⁶⁰⁵ "What gives knowledge of an eternal and infinite essence of God is common to all, and is equally in the part and in the whole," EIIP46.

⁶⁰⁶ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 333.

whole in which it participates but in no way resembles. Despite this similarity, post-structuralist and analytical authors alike tend to omit the ontological argument from their study of Spinoza.

I have argued in this dissertation that Spinoza's idea of God is expressed as the immanent idea of an absolute whole in which a diversity of singular things coheres. For, unless the standard of a true idea refers to an infinite regress that extends well beyond the horizon of causes that we can perceive, in which case an action would be indistinguishable from a passion, then a true idea must necessarily be its own standard, and this standard must be immanent to the nature of the mind that thinks it. Hence, "as the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false."⁶⁰⁷ Therefore, although inadequate ideas and passions are necessary elements of communicative and individualizing processes, they are not known through themselves but only in light of the common notions and affirmations through which we act and understand. The dynamic and historical process through which human beings communicate, are individualized, and so transition to a greater or lesser perfection thus depends on the active power of their essence – reason, faith, or desire – to appropriate and transform passions into actions, inadequate ideas into adequate ideas.

. . . it is only if I (consciously) pursue my own self-interest, or *utile* – only if I am ruthlessly honest in stripping my desire of the hypocrisy (idolatry) of superstitiously projecting (in the pretense of selfishness) my affects into final causes, which I then worship as my good – that I shall be able, both ethically and politically, to constitute desire as the good of all and the good as the desire of all. There is no good or desire outside of (without) the ego (the individual). The task, then, is to make the paradoxical discovery that there is no ego (individual), who is not (self-) contradictory, outside of

⁶⁰⁷ EIIP43schol.

(without) the good that is desired by all (individuals) or outside of (without) the desire that is the good of all individuals.⁶⁰⁸

Balibar convincingly argues through his interpretation of Spinoza that individuality is a function of communication. But what we learn from Polka in addition to this is the important caveat that although individuality is a function of communication, communication is itself preserved and perfected through the effort of individuals to interpret others as they would have others interpret themselves. Interpretation, thus, is irreducible to simply an adequate mode of communication, insofar as communication is defined by Balibar as dynamic exchanges “between two sequences of ideas and movements.”⁶⁰⁹ If we define it in this way then communication can be conceived as an automatic process to which we are ultimately subjected as non-participants. I have argued, however, that the adequacy of communications and the freedom of the individuals that it constructs depends on the extent to which those individuals participate in the communications that individualize them.

In conclusion, I have argued in this final chapter of my dissertation that Balibar’s theory of communication is most instructive precisely where he is closest to describing it as an interpretive endeavor:

Since no individual is rigorously ‘like’ any other, each having his own ‘temperament,’ multitude is then synonymous with exchange (in the broadest possible sense – exchange of properties is only one aspect of this idea) and with free communication between irreducibly singular beings . . . [Hence] the more the body politic, that individual of

⁶⁰⁸ Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion volume II*.

⁶⁰⁹ Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 96.

individuals, develops its own powers, the more the real-imaginary complex of social relationships as Spinoza conceives it is revealed as a principle of mobility.⁶¹⁰

This *principle of mobility* is precisely what I refer to as the *ethics of interpretation* according to which irreducibly singular individuals strive to establish common understandings by adapting their affective register to the communicative milieus in which they participate. A principle of mobility or an ethics of interpretation thus means that individuals do not desire to superimpose predetermined imaginations of their individuality in the communications that they participate in, expecting others to share the passions which that their images presuppose. On the contrary, it means that individuals desire to discover and accommodate to compatible ways of imagining themselves in and through the others with whom they communicate. For “as an image is related to more things, the more frequent it is, or the more often it flourishes, and the more it engages the mind.”⁶¹¹ And the more images through which we can recognize ourselves in our neighbours, and our neighbours in ourselves, then the better we understand ourselves as individuals because the better we understand the conditions and effects of our affections. For, “the images of things are more easily joined to images related to things we understand clearly and distinctly than to other images.”⁶¹²

An ethics of interpretation thus involves a response-ability to ourselves and others to maximize our affective register as much as possible, that is, our linguistic, artistic, cultural, and historical literacies so to be able to communicate with as many other individuals as possible.⁶¹³

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹¹ EVP11.

⁶¹² EIVP12.

⁶¹³ “For why is it more proper to relieve our hunger and thirst than to rid ourselves of melancholy? . . . It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can

For, we have seen that an increase in rational knowledge does not correspond to an affective immunity such that the more rational we become the fewer miscommunications we are prone to. On the contrary, the more powerful our intellect the more we desire to correct and improve the miscommunications of which we are inevitably a part.

If reason, desire, and faith were not equivalently substantial, then the priestly class and aristocratic elite would legitimately claim the unerring authority to dictate our interpretations. And if this were the case, then communication would not be a matter of active exchanges, but again a matter of passive imitation. But as Spinoza argues in the TPT, the meaning of words is immune to the corrupting passions of its pretended guardians precisely because “a language” – that is, a mode of communication – “is preserved by the learned and unlearned alike.”⁶¹⁴ Therefore, the functions of communications are determined by the common practices, actions, and powers of those who participate in them. In this way, the mutual desire for reciprocal understanding and empowerment encourages the correction of initial usage such that the particular words and images exchanged come to indefinitely approximate the ideas of things that are equally in the part and in the whole. So, if communications are not determined in advance, then a theory of communication must involve a complementary theory of interpretation that constructs meaning and value from its use.

And indeed, most errors consist only in our not rightly applying names to things. For when someone says that the lines which are drawn from the center of a circle to its circumference are unequal, he surely understands (then at least) by a circle something

use without injury to another. For the human body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things at once.” EIVP45schol.

⁶¹⁴ TPT7.42.

different from what mathematicians understand. Similarly, when men err in calculating, they have certain numbers in their mind and different ones on the paper. So if you consider what they have in mind, they really do not err, though they seem to err because we think they have in their mind the numbers which are on the paper. If this were not so, we would not believe that they were erring, just as I did not believe that he was erring whom I recently heard cry out that his courtyard had flown into his neighbor's hen although his words were absurd, because what he had in mind seemed sufficiently clear to me that his hen had flown into his neighbor's courtyard.

And most controversies have arisen from this, that men do not rightly explain their own mind, or interpret the mind of the other men badly.⁶¹⁵

So long as we strive for a perfection of which we are always already a part and interpret others as we would have others interpret ourselves, human beings have a universal power to participate in the communications through which they cohere into greater orders of individuality – not *despite* their differences, but because of them.

⁶¹⁵ EIIP47schol.

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