Metaphysics and ethics are two distinct fields in academic philosophy. The object of metaphysics is what is, while the object of ethics is what ought to be. Necessitarianism is a modal doctrine that appears to obliterate this neat distinction. For it is commonly assumed that ought (at least under normal circumstances) implies can. But if necessitarianism is true then I can only do what I actually do. Hence what I ought to do becomes limited to what I in fact do. This is one widespread way of construing the danger that necessitarianism poses for ethics. There is, however, another way in which this collapse of what is with what ought to be can be construed. One could think of what is as already being what ought to be, of the two being one. On this picture, everything that is, is already valuable.

In this thesis I explore the theory that being is intrinsically valuable. I do so by investigating the philosophy of perfection present in the works of the early modern rationalist Spinoza. For in his philosophy of perfection, I argue, we find being and value to be perfectly aligned. Hence, my reading challenges a widespread interpretation, according to which (ontological) perfection is divested of normativity in Spinozism.

The position that all being is intrinsically valuable since it is perfect may be thought to be incompatible with human perfectionism. For what room can there be for human progress toward an ideal of perfection if all that exists, is necessarily
perfect? The goal of the thesis is to respond to this question by providing a systematic interpretation of the metaphysics of human perfectibility in Spinoza’s philosophy. In order to achieve this goal, I undertake two tasks.

First, I examine Spinoza’s multi-faceted philosophy of perfection. I distinguish between ontological and teleological perfection. Moreover, I argue that since Spinoza maintains that everything is perfect to the extent that it is, perfection shoulders the role of a transcendental within his system. In order to highlight the normative significance of transcendental perfection, I compare Spinoza’s thought with the transcendental theory of the good in Thomas Aquinas. In addition, I distinguish between ontological and speculative perfection. Speculative perfection is conscious awareness of ontological perfection.

Second, I show how infinity plays an essential role in Spinoza’s ethics by indicating how we, by availing ourselves of this notion, are able to acquire a perspective on reality from which its ontological perfection may be discovered. On this basis, I am able to demonstrate the (relatively understudied) ethical and soteriological importance of Spinoza’s conception of infinity. I argue that it is because (a) Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is speculative, and because (b) one will be able to establish the (ontological) perfection of things by deducing it from the divine essence only when one considers this essence absolutely infinite, that (c) the absolute infinity of the divine essence plays a significant role in Spinoza’s account of human perfection as consisting in conscious awareness of the value of all being.
Spinoza and the Inevitable Perfection of Being

by

Sanja Sarman

(Sanja Särman, 曾杉雅)

BA (Uppsala University), BA (Uppsala University), MA (Uppsala University)

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Hong Kong.

July 2019
Nulla spero e nulla bramo
son’ contento
perché amo - Zeffiro
Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

Signed ______________________

Date ______________________
Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to all members of the philosophical community who have offered their perspectives on my thoughts. Their intellectual generosity means the world to me - not only because the benefits I drew from it in my thesis writing - but also, and more importantly, because I have sometimes been able to observe in them virtues that are so rare and difficult that in extolling them I feel as awkward as someone who recounts her dreams. Let me try, nonetheless. Sometimes I suffocate in my thoughts and, like all others, gasp for the air of communion. But communion is only possible if one is sincere and accountable. Sincerity is the purest form of charity. It is so crystalline and immaculate that one easily doubts its existence. I too sometimes think that there is no sincerity and hence no communication worth its name. I too sometimes suspect that it is not possible to listen to the other, to disagree with him without malice, to hold oneself and others accountable for what is said, to admit of errors, to willingly shoulder the yoke of truth, to make oneself transparent out of charity, to announce without fear where that transparency ceases and where what is opaque and ineffable begins. So perhaps I will seem naïve if I insist on maintaining that in philosophy, all these things happen and overbearing if I claim that they all happened to me. Yet I do not claim that it is always there, that sincerity marks every philosophical encounter. But there are people who are sincere, whose minds are knives mildly cutting the sinews of pretense.

Allow me to specify the targets of my gratitude.

I thank Yitzhak Melamed, Anthony Lynch, Alexandra Cook and Igor Agostini for providing their feedback on my research proposal. I thank Michael Della Rocca for valuable feedback on Chapter 1, and the participants at Spinozanum Collegianum II (2017), especially Karolina Hübner and Olivér István Tóth, for their helpful comments on a previous version of that chapter. I thank Marcel
Quarfood for commenting on Chapter 2. I thank Arnaud Pelletier for commenting on Chapter 3. I thank the participants at the Departmental Seminar of Hong Kong for discussing Chapter 4. I thank Joseph Almog, Yitzhak Melamed, Ohad Nachtomy, Reed Winegar, an anonymous referee, and the participants at the NYC Workshop on Infinity in Early Modern Philosophy (2016) for their comments on Chapter 6, of which an earlier version has been published in *Infinity in Early Modern Philosophy* (2018). I thank Igor Agostini for valuable comments on a chaotic draft of Chapter 7 and for extending an invitation so that I was able to present my work at the Seminario del Centro Interdipartimentale di studi su Descartes e il Seicento in collaborazione con il Centre d’études cartésiennes Paris-Sorbonne, Università del Salento (2018). I thank Peter Myrdal for priceless virtual discussions about the ideas in Chapter 8. I also thank Jean-Pascal Anfray and Martin Lin for their valuable suggestions.

I thank my supervisors Timothy O’Leary, who dared take me on as a PhD student and without whose unflinching support I could not have completed this journey, and Jamin Asay, who got onboard somewhat later, for reading through and offering his generous and incisive comments on my drafts. I am grateful for the institutional support from Hong Kong University and for the financial support provided by the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship.

Prior to my PhD, I had the opportunity to study under several inspiring teachers, and I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to them, to whom I owe so much. These teachers include, but are not limited to, Ove Strid and Denis Searby who taught me Greek, Ann-Mari Jönsson, Christer Henriksén and Gerd Harveling who taught me Latin, Björn Sundberg, who supervised my BA in literature, Paula Quinon from whom I learned to strive for clarity, Anna-Pya Sjödén who kindled my interest in philosophical approaches to the moment of salvation, and, if I may, Farigh Ghaderi, Vitali Borovic and Yu Keming, who all have tried to teach me the plastic importance of certain facial bones, and Stephan Balleux, who first taught me how to do a *glacis*. I am also grateful to Anders Odenstedt, Anders Persson, Antonino Mazzù, Hans Ruin, Mats Lindberg and Kate Larson. There are surely others whom I have forgotten: I extend thanks to the worthy yet forgotten ones as well.

VII
Marcel Quarfood and Peter Myrdal were my supervisors for the degrees of BA in philosophy (Marcel) and MA (Marcel and Peter). I am more grateful for their mentorship than I can say. Thanks to Marcel who long ago so soberly answered my first rambling nocturnal email about Plotinus and das Ding an sich. Thanks to Peter for all Skype-conversations about the soul, God and different ways to slice up the universe.

I want to thank friends and family as well, but I cannot list all. At Hong Kong University, I thank Vera Matarese, Zoe Cocchiaro, Fei Song, Jack Yip, Felix Yeung, Qing Lang, David Wong, Frank Sanders, and all the postgraduates at the Philosophy Department for maintaining an atmosphere of collegiality and peace: Wen Shan Chan I thank additionally for looking after my desk. I thank Xidan Zhou for keeping track of me in her dreams. I thank Bin Shi for helping me buy silk from Suzhou. I thank Salome, for having ended our folie à deux. I thank Anna Iskra, Rita Frieske and Xing Xing for their friendship, and also for housing me in Hong Kong, so that I never had to live in a capsule or a cage. I thank Stefan Arnborg for tirelessly emailing with a mathematical pagan. I thank my sister Luna Särman for talking with me about the content of my thesis - twice!

I thank Johan Arnborg, love of my life and tear in my throat, for his relentless, uncanny, support, and for his help with a bibliography from hell.

Last and least I thank Gaspar, for not doing anything at all.
Contents

Epigraph iv.
Declaration v.
Acknowledgements vi.
Table of Contents ix.

Introduction 1.
Chapter 1: Transcendental Perfection in Spinoza’s Philosophy 10.
   Introduction 10.
   1.1 What is a transcendental? 13.
   1.2 The good as a transcendental 15.
   1.3 Spinoza’s position on the transcendentals 18.
   1.4 Spinoza’s rejection of the good as a transcendental 25.
   1.5 Ontological versus teleological perfection 29.
   1.6 Ethical consequences 35.
   Conclusion: A Spinozist theodicy 37.

Chapter 2: Spinoza’s Negation Theory of Evil and its Consequences for his Ideal of Human Perfection 39.
   Introduction 39.
   2.1 Contemporary context 40.
   2.2 Aquinas and Spinoza 43.
      2.2.1 Aquinas and Spinoza on the metaphysics of evil 43.
      2.2.2 Aquinas and Spinoza on moral evil and deep blame 51.
   2.3 Ethical significance 62.
      2.3.1 The locus of perfection in Spinoza’s thought 62.
      2.3.2 The paradox of Spinoza’s theory of human perfection revisited 65.
   Conclusion: The status of Spinoza’s ideal of perfection 67.

Chapter 3: Knowledge of God and Spinoza’s Ontological Account of Human Perfection 70.
   Introduction 70.
   3.1 Human perfection and knowledge of God 72.
   3.2 Necessarily self-communicating ontological perfection 78.
      3.2.1 Ontological perfection and love of God 78.
Conclusion

Conclusion

Bibliography
Introduction

Metaphysics and ethics are two distinct fields in academic philosophy. Simply put, the object of metaphysics is *what is*, while the object of ethics is *what ought to be*. Necessitarianism is a modal doctrine that appears to obliterate this neat distinction. For it is commonly assumed that ought (at least under normal circumstances) implies can. But if necessitarianism is true then I can only do what I actually do. Hence what I ought to do becomes limited to what I actually do. *What is*, as it were, swallows up *what ought to be*. This is one widespread way of construing the danger that necessitarianism (as indeed mere determinism) poses for ethics. There is, however, another way in which this collapse of *what is* with *what ought to be* can be construed. One could, horrendously, think of *what is* as already being *what ought to be*, of the two being one. On this picture, everything that is, is already valuable. The thought is horrendous because it appears to sanction all the evils ever committed, and ever to be committed, by human beings. But no morally sensible person would want to say that everyone, including murderers and rapists, has always done what ought to be done. Without sanctioning any such evils, I wish nonetheless to explore, in this thesis, the theory that being is intrinsically valuable. I will do so by investigating the philosophy of perfection present in the works of Baruch, or Benedictus, Spinoza. For in his philosophy of perfection, as I will show, we find being and value to be perfectly aligned in this way.

It is well-known that Spinoza espoused a concept of metaphysical perfection as coextensive with reality. No one has articulated the metaphysical dimension of this theory better than Samuel Newlands. Newlands’ position on the relation between this metaphysical perfection and normativity is also representative of the state of the art. He writes: “[Spinoza’s] more contentious thesis is that perfection is not an intrinsically normative or moral feature of the world. […] Spinoza does not reject the mind-independent perfection of God, the world or particular things
[…] Instead, Spinoza rejects the further association of metaphysical perfection with moral and normative dimensions” (2017, pp. 269-70).

One should define terms such as ‘normative’ or ‘moral’ before one dismisses them as irrelevant for Spinoza’s theory of metaphysical perfection. As is well-known, the moral is but one subregion of the normative. The normative encompasses not only the moral (directive) dimension of what one should do, but anything pertaining to some kind of evaluation. There are thus two ways in which the normative and moral can be considered irrelevant for Spinoza’s theory of perfection. First, if perfection for Spinoza fails to be normative, it clearly cannot be moral. While I would grant Newlands that perfection is not for Spinoza a directive standard whereby we can evaluate the actions of human beings morally, I reject his idea that it is normatively neutral. To say that something is metaphysically perfect is to express a value judgment. On my reading of Spinoza, it is in virtue of this normativity that metaphysical perfection can occupy a place at the very heart of his doctrine of human perfection. Second, one could mistakenly think that because Spinoza’s concept of metaphysical perfection is not a standard whereby actions can be morally evaluated it is not normative at all. Such a reduction of the normative sphere to the exclusively moral should be avoided.

It is to the exploration of the normative dimension of metaphysical perfection in Spinoza’s ethics that this thesis is devoted. The overall goal of the present thesis is to present a novel reading of Spinoza’s philosophy of human perfection which combines metaphysical and ethical elements. I will seek to achieve this goal by

1 On Newland’s view (2010, pp. 67-8), metaphysical perfection is optimized harmony, and more specifically balance between the ontological plentitude and the parsimony Spinoza is committed to by 1p16 and 1p15, respectively. For similar assessments of perfection as normatively neutral in Spinoza’s philosophy, see Broad (2001); Jarrett (2014) and Rice (1977, p. 105). For an acknowledgement of the tension between ontological and normative perfection, see Schaub (1933, p. 21).
2 My approach is innovating (although I do not claim it is unique), because Spinoza’s ethics and his metaphysics are often studied in isolation. Nadler (2011, pp. xii-xiv) claims that only in recent years has Spinoza’s rehabilitation as a profound ethical and political philosopher begun. As evidence of Nadler’s assessment of the state of the art, one may want to mention that Bennett, in his pathbreaking study, argues that the line of support that Spinoza’s doctrine of mind/body parallelism has in the metaphysical claim that mind
showing how subtle distinctions between ontological and teleological perfection, on the one hand, and ontological and speculative perfection, on the other, allow Spinoza to formulate a multifaceted, and at times seemingly paradoxical, philosophy of human perfection.

A secondary goal of my thesis, inextricably linked with the first, is to show that it is Spinoza’s radical commitment to two remarkably traditional views - the transcendental character of perfection, on the one hand, and the analogy of the infinite, on the other - that allows him to articulate this complex theory of perfection. Achieving this goal will allow me to elucidate the place of Spinoza’s thought in history by showing how modern thought develops in partial continuity with medieval philosophy and theology. In From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe (1957), Alexandre Koyré advanced the historical thesis that thinkers, during the early modern period - whether they were philosophers, poets or scientists - transferred traditional divine attributes such as immensity and infinity from God to a physical universe that ancient and medieval cosmology had confined within limits. Koyré pointed out how this “destruction of the cosmos” implied “the discarding by scientific thought of all considerations based upon value - concepts, such as perfection, harmony, meaning and aim, and finally the utter devalorization of being, the divorce of the world of value and the world of facts” (1957, p. 2).

Spinoza is both an example of and a counterexample to the development described by Koyré. Certainly, Spinoza undertakes an infinitization of the

---

and body are attributes of the one substance is “the only transmission of weight from the ethical doctrines back to the argumentative core of part 1” (1984, p. 17). Since mind/body parallelism is only derivatively ethical, this suggests that, on Bennett’s reading, the metaphysical first part of the Ethics is all but ethically irrelevant.

3 For a note on the development of this historiography, see Nicholas Jolley (2006). In recent years it has been increasingly acknowledged that, rather than inventing entirely new concepts, early modern thinkers were, as Jolley puts it, to a great extent, inventing by “put[ting] new wine in old bottles” (Jolley, 2006, p. 95).

4 Flaubert too read Spinoza in this way. The devil is a Spinozist in La tentation de saint Antoine, and subscribes to doctrines such as the infinity of a universe without finality; the identity of God’s will with his essence and the ensuing impossibility of contingency, and tempts the saint to “conceive of God beyond God, being beyond being” [concevoir Dieu au-delà de Dieu, l'être par-dessus l'être] (1983, p. 212).
universe: physical extension is, for him, an infinite attribute of God. Yet, this
infinitization of the universe is a direct result of his equation of Nature with God.
Divine attributes are not “transferred” from God to Nature: instead, the possession
of divine attributes by Nature simply is the possession of those attributes by God.
But by merely stating that Spinoza identifies Nature with God, I have not yet
answered the most interesting interpretative question. This question concerns
whether the new conception of the cosmos as infinite and mechanistically
operating comes to supplant God, or whether traditional divine attributes such as
perfection come to imbue the cosmos with value. To put it in Koyré’s terms, does
Spinoza, by identifying Nature with God, transform God into a “world of facts” or
Nature into a “world of value”? To put the matter less tendentiously, which ratio
of traditionally divine attributes to early modern cosmological ones are we to
think of as characterizing the hybrid of God/Nature? The “cold” character of
Spinoza’s God - a god certainly located beyond good and evil - has rightly
attracted much attention in the scholarship, and that Spinoza reduced the
explanatory role of teleology in natural philosophy is well-known. By contrast,
the ethical consequences of Spinoza’s understanding of God have attracted far
less attention. By arguing that the definition of God as absolutely infinite is
harnessed by Spinoza for the purposes of designing a human perfectionism I will
point at some of these consequences. Since ethical and soteriological
consequences follow from Spinoza’s description of God, God-Nature is not solely
a “world of facts” but also the realm of (some) value: perfection. This value is not
opposed to reality. It is reality. My account of human perfection in Spinoza’s
philosophy will thus allow for this understudied alignment of being and value to
play a central role.

In order to show the historical interest of the present interpretation - namely the
continuity of medieval themes in Spinoza’s thought -, I include background
sections where appropriate, where I contrast Spinoza’s philosophy primarily with
the thought of Thomas Aquinas. The major focus will nonetheless always be on
Spinoza’s own philosophy. The thesis does therefore not purport to make a
contribution to the scholarship in the field of Thomist thought.
The thesis is divided into a First Part comprising four chapters, an intermittent Discussion, a Second Part comprising three chapters, and a final Conclusion. While the chapters are thematically unified - a unity centered on perfection in Spinozism -, with the exception of the Discussion, they are all intended to have stand-alone value as contributions to specific issues.

Below I present the themes of each Part followed by synopses of each chapter.

Part I: Ontological perfection and Necessity.

Chapter 1. I distinguish between teleological and ontological perfection and argue that ontological perfection shoulders the role of a transcendental property in Spinoza’s philosophy. Because all being follows necessarily from God’s nature, all being is perfect. Most importantly, I point out the prima facie paradoxical consequences of this transcendental theory of perfection for Spinoza’s ethics.

Chapter 2. While the previous chapter was devoted to the thesis that all reality is perfection, this chapter treats the obverse relation, i.e. the thesis that no reality is an imperfection. I contrast Spinoza’s negation theory of imperfection with a privation theory of evil. While according to the latter, evil is a privative lack of being, for Spinoza imperfection is simply a negation of being: it is not the lack of some being due to the individual lacking it, since no more being or perfection is due to anything than that which necessarily follows from God’s nature.

Chapter 3. Teleological perfection has no ontological foundation for Spinoza. In this chapter I argue against a constructivist reading of Spinoza’s ethics proposed by Charles Jarrett, in favour of an ontologically grounded ideal of human perfection. My thesis is that human perfection can be ontologically grounded since it is contemplative. In addition, I distinguish between raw ontological perfection - the perfection all being has, insofar as it is - and speculative perfection: consciously recognized ontological perfection or ontological perfection “mirrored” in consciousness.
Chapter 4. Since Spinoza apparently grounds the perfection of all things in the fact that they necessarily follow from the divine nature, Spinoza’s commitment to necessitarianism must be discussed. Instead of providing textual evidence for necessitarianism directly (a task that has already been amply fulfilled in the scholarship), I attack the two strongest arguments for attributing modal contingentism to Spinoza (due to Edwin Curley and Newlands), and argue that these arguments fail to establish that thesis. Interestingly, both arguments in favour of contingentism appeal to Spinoza’s claim that singular things have an infinity of causal ancestors. I present an alternative theory of contingency which bases only the contingent appearance of things on this infinity. Crucially, it is by changing one’s perspective on the infinity of causal ancestors that one can come to regard things as either necessary or contingent.

Discussion. I assess the picture extricable from Part 1 by discussing three relations of grounding: (1) that of necessitarianism in the Principle of Sufficient Reason, (2) that of necessitarianism in divine infinity and perfection and finally, (3) the absence of (ontologically solid) imperfection in necessitarianism. My goal is to show that it is (2), the grounding of necessitarianism in divine perfection and infinity, that is crucial to Spinoza in the establishment of (3), i.e. the absence of (ontologically solid) imperfection in the world. This result is interesting because it shows that, as far as his theory of perfection is concerned, Spinoza’s theology - and more precisely his view that God is absolutely infinite - takes precedence over his metaphysical rationalism. Lastly, I link this picture of metaphysical perfection with Spinoza’s practical account of strictly human perfection.

Part II: Human Perfection and the Optics of Salvation.

Chapter 6. I draw on the results reached in Chapter 4 by applying the theory that a shift in the perspective through which one regards infinity can affect how one conceives of the modality of things, to my reading of Spinoza’s cognitive therapy of the affects. Since one becomes more perfect to the extent that one acts more, and since (speaking from the mental point of view) one is active to the extent that one’s ideas are adequate and passive to the extent that they are inadequate, to replace one’s inadequate idea which presents the object of one’s passion as
contingent with an adequate idea which presents the same object as necessary, is one way in which humans can increase in perfection. Unless one can *intellectually* conceive the infinity of causal ancestors behind the object of one’s passion one cannot consider it necessary in the way required to combat the passion. It is by conceiving of the infinity of the causal ancestry of modes as “qualitative” - after the manner of the qualitative infinity of God’s attributes - that one will be able to conceive this infinity intellectually rather than by the imagination’s means. But how can we construe the infinity of the modes after the manner of the attributes’ infinity? And with what right can infinity be predicated of God’s attributes in the first place?

Chapter 7. The question just raised belongs to a family of questions all pertaining to the problem of religious language. For this reason, I first provide an introduction to that problem, thereby situating Spinoza’s philosophy within a broader historical context. Subsequently I attempt to answer the question, raised at the end of Chapter 6, of how the predication of infinity works across the contexts of substance, attributes and modes. Contrary to the reading of Jean-Luc Marion, I advance the thesis that it works analogically, but that the analogy is inverted. By calling the analogy inverted I mean that, while in traditional accounts of analogy creatures are known prior to the creator, for Spinoza our knowledge of God’s infinity is prior to our knowledge of the infinity of the modes, as the latter is deduced from the former. But how can this claim be squared with experience? Surely we do not know God’s infinite nature to the extent that Spinoza claims we do. Squaring the Spinozist claim with experience will involve invoking different perspectives one can adopt vis-à-vis the divine object. More specifically, the kind of knowledge of God we inevitably possess does not involve knowledge of God *as* God. Only by realizing that God is absolutely infinite, does one recognize in anything that is conceivably an attribute of God an actual attribute of God.

Chapter 8. In this chapter I discuss the ultimate shift in perspective that on my reading is conducive to perfection in humans. This shift occurs when I come to know that my knowledge, *qua* perfection, is ultimately to be predicated of God. I argue that Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge consists exactly in the transformed reflexivity whereby I come to know under a divine guise not the object of my
knowledge but its subject. Such an interpretation of Spinoza’s difficult doctrines of the third kind of knowledge and the accompanying intellectual love of God is of the outmost relevance for this investigation into the Spinozist theory of perfection. On my reading of these doctrines, Spinoza advances a surprising ideal of human perfection as consisting in humans recognizing themselves to be what they necessarily are.

Before I begin with the actual thesis, let me make a few notational points.

(a) In referring to the Ethics, I adopt the shorthand where 1p7 refers to the seventh proposition of the first part of the Ethics. app = appendix, a = axiom, c = corollary, d = demonstration (when following a proposition-indicating number) or definition (when following a Book-indicating number), l = lemma, p = proposition, s = scholium.

(b) In referring to Spinoza’s other works, I adopt the following standard abbreviations: CM = Cogitata Metaphysica (Metaphysical Thoughts); KV = Korte Verhandling van God, de mensch, en deszelvs welstand (Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being); NS = Nagelate Schriften (the 1677 Dutch translation of Opera posthuma); PPC = Principia Philosophiae Cartesii (Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy; TIE = Tractatus de intellectus emendatione (Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect); and TTP = Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (Theological-Political Treatise). For the English translation of Spinoza’s texts, I refer to Edwin Curley’s editions of 1988 and 2016 (abbreviated as C or C. II, respectively, and immediately followed by page number). For the Latin, I consult Gebhardt’s critical edition (Spinoza Opera, Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1925).

(c) In the bibliography, sources with an original publication date prior to the year 1800 are listed first.
Part I: Ontological Perfection and Necessity
Chapter 1

Transcendental Perfection in Spinoza’s Philosophy

Introduction.

In this chapter I will show that, in spite of Spinoza’s own statements to the contrary, a transcendental property of being plays a crucial role in his philosophy. More precisely, I argue, ontological perfection plays this role. The qualification of perfection as ontological is necessary, since Spinoza’s use of the word ‘perfection’ is dual (Spinoza explicitly acknowledges this, for instance in Metaphysical Thoughts [henceforward CM], I, 6). Spinoza’s dual use of ‘perfection’, as intending, on the one hand ontological perfection, and on the other hand teleological perfection - a concept without ontological foundation, is well-documented in the scholarship. However, this chapter is not merely concerned with formulating this difference. Instead, my twofold goal is to (i) explore the continuity of Spinoza’s use of ontological perfection with medieval transcendental thought by arguing that since it is coextensive with being (esse), perfection plays the role of a transcendental, and (ii), set the stage for an ethical and soteriological exploration of the dynamic interplay between ontological perfection (understood as a transcendental) and teleological perfection (understood as a universal).

Spinoza’s position on universals has been much debated in the scholarship. This is justified since, as Lee Rice points out, the significance of so much of what Spinoza says alters depending on which approach to universals he is seen as adopting.\(^5\) Since the earliest days of Spinoza interpretation, commentators have

\(^5\) Rice (1984) cites a number of topics, ranging from Spinoza’s epistemology, to the status of God’s attributes, and, finally, the issue of “human nature. Rice does not in this context mention any significant ethical implications.
entrenched themselves in one of two camps: either Spinoza is seen as a nominalist, or as a realist. Since Spinoza explicitly rejects universals, realist readings appropriate, as it were, some ideas which are considered adequate in Spinoza’s philosophy, and call these the “true” universals. Candidates for such true universals are the ideas we form of the attributes of God-or-Nature (henceforward, for textual economy, referred to as ‘God’), or the common notions which in the Ethics enable knowledge of the second kind.\(^6\)

Before entering into this discussion, it is worthwhile to ask what can be meant by the nominalist/realist distinction in the context of Spinoza interpretation.

Realism is the view that abstract entities are real. Nominalism, by contrast, is the view that there are no abstract entities.\(^7\) The historical nominalism which Spinoza (supposedly) professed, however, was specifically concerned with denying that

---

\(^{6}\) Haserot (1950) has suggested that the concepts we have of the divine attributes can qualify as universals. I agree with Rice (1984), that it does not seem very likely that the attributes are “universals.” It should be noted, in this context, that Spinoza “inherited” the attribute of thought from Descartes’ cogitatio and his attribute of extension from Descartes’ extension. But in a letter to Arnauld, (1903, p. 221), Descartes denied that extension and thought were something universal [universale quid], maintaining instead that they were each a particular nature [naturam particularem]. In the light of (1) the significance of the attributes in Spinoza’s metaphysics and epistemology, (2) his explicit denial of the epistemic value of universals and (3) the conspicuous lack of a precedent in Descartes, from whom he borrowed (and of course reinvented) the notion of attribute, it seems very unlikely that Spinoza’s attributes would qualify as universals. I cannot discuss this question in further detail here.

As for the status of universals of the common notions, the most balanced argument in the favor of such as a view is Piero di Vona (1960, parte 1). Vona argues that if due attention is given to 2p49s, it becomes evident that Spinoza’s criticism targets mainly the origin of the universals, not their nature and value (Ibid., p. 156). An epistemically positive value can therefore be conferred on the common notions, which for Vona is what makes Spinoza’s position as one “not far removed from that of moderate realism” (Ibid., p. 152). However, as far as I can see, it is exactly the origin of the concepts in question, whether universals or common notions, which determines their value. Again, this topic merits further discussion.

\(^{7}\) See Szabó (2005).

But what does it mean for there to “be” no properties (for instance)? Does it mean that nominalists can’t say that two roses are both the same shade of red, since the redness of the one rose isn’t the redness of the other? Bennett (1984, p. 39) takes nominalism to imply this, as does Haserot (1950). More specifically, on Bennett’s view, nominalism implies that we can’t have knowledge of properties at all, which effectively disqualifies Spinoza’s account of the second kind of knowledge. By contrast, Rice (1984, p. 22) following Nelson Goodman, has opined that nominalism is compatible with the existence of instantiated properties.
there are such abstract entities as *universals*. By a universal is meant that concept under which particulars are subsumed, such as, for instance, the genus ‘horse’, and, as we shall see, ‘perfection’ in a certain sense of the word. In order for one to know Spinoza’s position on this matter, it is necessary to first adjudicate in what sense universals can be said to have reality or being in the first place.

In this context, it is important to bear in mind that, for Spinoza, being admits of degrees. Proof of this is for instance 1p9: “The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it.” The fact that Spinoza held a notion of being which admitted of degrees shows that one needs to better understand Spinozist being, if one is to be able to shed light on the status of the universals in his philosophy. Perhaps, in the end, universals can be said to have being, or to be, *to some degree*. At the end of this chapter, I will show in what sense they do have being to some degree. Since I prefer to suspend judgment on whether Spinoza is rightly to be characterized as a nominalist or not until after I have undertaken this investigation of his ontology, I will follow Bennett (1984) in using the less theoretically charged term “(conceptual) minimalism” to refer to Spinoza’s tendency not to posit abstract entities, when that can be avoided.

The question of what being is, for Spinoza, leads us to the question of the transcendentals. For while the Aristotelian categories determined *what* (how, when, etc.) x is, the transcendentals concern the fact *that* x is, or differently put, they concern what x is solely in virtue of its being. Hence, an exploration of transcendental being in Spinoza’s philosophy will also provide an answer to the question of what it means to be, for Spinoza. However, the traditional transcendentals of being (*ens*), along with thing (*res*) and something (*aliquid*), are explicitly rejected in 2p40s1 - the locus classicus for Spinoza’s dismissal of the *universals*, and on the same grounds as the *universals* are rejected. This may lead one to assume that Spinoza’s concept of being is not thick, or at least not rendered thick by his subscription to any form of transcendentals. In what follows, I will investigate if this is the case.

---

8 Whether ‘nominalism’ adequately captures a historical position is debatable. Pasnau (2011, p. 84) has claimed that ‘nominalism’ is a flawed organizing concept for the medieval period, since it was “not a view at all”.

12
In general, while there are historical studies devoted to Spinoza’s explicit position on the transcendentals in the secondary literature, an assessment of the consequences of this position for his ethical system is still wanting. In what follows, I will outline Spinoza’s position with the goal of identifying some inconsistency in Spinoza’s rejection of the transcendentals, which justifies an investigation into the remnant of a transcendental in his own philosophy. In this chapter I argue that, in spite of his statements to the contrary in 2p40s and CM I, 6, Spinoza does entertain a transcendental property of being, namely ontological perfection. Explicating Spinoza’s concept of ontological perfection will, in turn, shed light on his doctrine of universals. In addition, it will pave the way for a deeper understanding of Spinoza’s arguably paradoxical program of ethics.

1.1. What is a transcendental?

The theory of transcendental being was developed by the schoolmen of the Latin West during the 12th to the 17th century. According to Aristotle’s influential understanding of being, while the categories explicate the way things are (as a substance subsisting in itself, or as a quality inhering in a substance, for instance), being as such (being as being: to on he on) is manifested in all categories, without itself being subject to any categorical determination. Although the doctrine of the convertibility of being and some term, taken to be super-categorical after the manner of being (such as the good, or the one), has deep roots in Greek philosophy, it was scholastic authors who, in dialogue with the Latin corpus

---

9 Vona (1960, parte 2, pp. 205-20; 1977) extensively treat Spinoza’s position on the medieval doctrine of the transcendentals. Following Vona, I am familiar with two essays thematically devoted to the topic: Vinti (2002) and Vertucci (2002). Scribano (1990) discusses Spinoza’s position on the transcendentals in the CM. For the issue of the historical development of the transcendentals and the various shapes in which thinkers (mainly Western schoolmen) entertained the thought during this period, see Vona (1994). For a general overview of Spinoza’s relation to scholasticism, see Freudentahl (1887, pp. 85–138).

10 For Aristotle’s influential denials that being is a category (a genus) see Metaphysics, Volume 1: Book 3, 998b24–29 (1933) and Posterior Analytics 92b14–15 (1960).
aristotelicum, elaborated a thick concept of transcendental being. As Jan Aersten writes:

[The medieval authors] always refer to the same four Aristotelian texts: the Philosopher’s claim that ‘being’ is not a genus (in the third book of the Metaphysics), his discussion of the relation between being and one (in the fourth book of the Metaphysics), the insinuation of an ‘ontological’ conception of truth (in the second book of the Metaphysics), and the criticism of the Platonic Idea of the Good (in the Nicomachian Ethics, I, c. 4). (2012, p. 60).

Notions other than being were called transcendental on account of their “transcending” all categorical determination, after the manner of being itself. Such transcendentals could be either simply or disjunctively “convertible with being” - that is, coextensional, and yet not cointensional, with the term ‘being’. (I will not here address the issue of disjunctive transcendentals.)

If being as being is not limited to any specific category, then nor are the terms coextensional with being. The names listed as transcendental varied in different accounts, but invariably seem to have comprised the metaphysical good (bonum). Although Aquinas’s account of the transcendentals varies, the list he presents in De Veritate, q. 1. a. 1. resp., comprises the following six transcendentals: ens, res, alicuid and unum, verum, bonum. What arguments were adduced in defense of

---

11 Bärthlein (1972) has convincingly argued that there is no textual basis on which to impute the doctrine of a transcendental good to Aristotle, although it probably flourished, in some form, in the Academy. Nonetheless the doctrine sprouted from Aristotelian roots.

12 The “basic texts” for Aquinas’s treatment of the transcendentals are, apart from De Veritate q. 1 art. 1 and q. 2 art. 21 and In I Sententiarium d. 2. q. 3 art. 3.: see Aertsen (1996, p. 72).

13 In De Veritate, q. 1, a. 1, resp. (1980, p. 1) Aquinas first writes: “Illud autem quod primo intellectus concipit quasi notissimum, et in quod conceptiones omnes resolvit, est ens, ut Avicenna dicit in principio suae metaphysicae. Unde oportet quod omnes aliae conceptiones intellectus accipientur ex additione ad ens”. It is interesting that Aquinas’s transcendental project is here delineated against the horizon of the Avicennian notion that “common being” (ens commune) is “first known” and, one might add, for this reason the proper object of metaphysics. See Chapters 1-2 in Courtine (1990) for an analysis of Thomist metaphysics against this Avicennian horizon. Aertsen (1996, pp. 81–84) also emphasizes this context.

When the “mode expressed” (modus expressus) by the concept adding to being is “general and consequent upon all being” (generalis et consequens omne ens), the concept in question is a transcendental. Aquinas’ taxonomy for transcendentals in (loc. cit.) is as follows: concepts that follow being absolutely divide into two categories: affirmative (thing: res), and negative (one: unum); concepts that follow being “considered in their relation to another” (secundum ordinem unius ad alterum), are divided into the concept
the coextensionality of being with these transcendentals? Since my subsequent study will be devoted to Spinoza’s position on a transcendental having bearing on ethics, I will limit my study to the case of the transcendental good.

1.2. The good as a transcendental.

In what follows, I will not present a historical survey of the concept of a transcendental good, but merely highlight an aspect of that doctrine that will prove salient in my analysis of Spinoza. This aspect is the theological and even (arguably) theodicial role played by the doctrine in question.

In his influential theological opusculum De Hebdomadibus, Boethius considers the question of how created substances can be good in their being, although they are not substantial goods. If they were substantial goods they would be good merely in virtue of their own being, but this is the prerogative of God. Nonetheless, if they only participate in the good, they are not good through themselves, and then there will be a merely accidental relation between the fact that created substances are, and the fact that they are good. But only that which is good in itself - in its being - can tend toward the good, and on Boethius’ view, all things manifestly tend towards the good.

Boethius’ way of resolving this dilemma consisted in asserting that every created substance that is, is good insofar as it is since its existence flows from (the will of) the first good. Since created goods are good in themselves in virtue of standing in the relation of creation to the first good, they are not good simply in virtue of their own being, an ontological status reserved for God, yet they are nonetheless good in their being (that is, in the being imparted to them by God’s act of creation). In his Disputed Questions on Truth, q. 21, Aquinas cited, with approval, Boethius’

which distinguishes one being from all other things (something: aliud), and concepts which follow being according to the conformity of one being with another (secundum convenientam unius entis ad aliud). This latter conformity takes place in the soul which alone has the intrinsic capacity to concur with all things, Aquinas says, referring to Aristotle’s De Anima, III. The soul concurs with all being in two ways, either in accordance with its appetitive faculty - engendering the transcendental good (bonum), or with its intellective faculty - engendering the transcendental true (verum).

14 See “How substances can be good in virtue of their existence without being absolute goods”, in Boethius (1973, p. 44).
reasoning, which evidently derives the convertibility of good and being from God’s act of creation.\textsuperscript{16}

In essence, the incentive to treat ‘being’ and ‘good’ as transcendental terms came from the Judeo-Christian doctrine of God’s creation (and maintenance) of being. Historically the doctrine also served a polemical, and more precisely theodicial, purpose. It has been asserted the kind of theodicy the doctrine operates is not \textit{moral} but \textit{metaphysical}, since the goodness that is convertible with being is not the moral good, but the metaphysical good. This has been argued, with respect to Aquinas, by Davies (2011).\textsuperscript{17} What is the difference between these different kinds of good? The moral good is a concept intimately wound up with approval. We judge someone to be morally good when we consider them to act as they should act in a given situation, and we judge someone’s character to be good when it is disposed to do such acts. But it is far from clear that we can apply such categories of moral approval (or disapproval) to creatures that are fundamentally different from ourselves. We do not normally judge wolfs or plants by such categories. Yet, God is presumably more different from us than any wolf or plant. Therefore, it is far from clear that our moral judgments of approval and disapproval are applicable to him in the first place. By contrast, when we want to say that reality is metaphysically good, we want to assert that it stands in a certain relation to

\textsuperscript{16} However, in \textit{Summa Theologicae} I, q. 5, 1, and 3, Aquinas also provided an independent conceptual analysis in favor of the co-extensionality of being and good. This reasoning hinges on four identifications: (a) of the good with the desirable; (b) of the desirable with what has perfection; (c) of having perfection with having actuality; and (d) of having actuality with having being. I borrow this presentation of Aquinas’ argument from Aertsen (1985, pp. 449–70).

For a different analysis of the passage, see Davies (2011, p. 32). Davies construes the passage as an analysis of “what has to be the case [for X] to exist.” So, in order for there to be a human being, “there has to be what succeeds in being human […] In other words, the notion of existing is bound up with the notion of achievement or success.” In order to be, there has to be something which succeeds in, or is sufficiently good at, being what it is.

\textsuperscript{17} On Davies’ (2011) reading, the “theodicy” supplied by Aquinas (and indeed, by all subscribing to the convertibility of being and good and the concomitant privation theory of evil) does not answer the question: “How can God justify himself \textit{morally} from the evil that exists?” Yet, the theory of being and good as convertible and the privation theory of evil clearly yield a metaphysical answer to the question: “How can God justify himself from the evil that exists?” The justification is this: God, as the creator of all and only being, does not create evil. Thus, on Davies’ view, although this does not exonerate God \textit{morally}, one can nonetheless speak of a theodicy, that is, of a formula which explains how God’s omnipotence is to be combined with the presence of evil in the world.
God’s goodness. To call reality good in a transcendent sense always involves grounding the goodness of reality in God’s goodness. Although the metaphysical good may not be moral, it is nonetheless clearly normative: for if being is metaphysically good, this should make us prone to evaluate it positively - and everything that has bearing on evaluation is normative - even though the evaluation in question need not be moral in nature.

Yet, one may object that we do not have epistemic access to a good that is not fundamentally related to what is moral and that the theodicy offered by Aquinas (and others) by the means of the transcendentality of the good must therefore, pace Davies (2011), be moral, or at least stand in a meaningful relation to the moral good. I cannot here address this objection in depth. But a partial response is as follows. Although there are many examples of normativity as disconnected from morality, the one I think would be especially relevant in this context is the normativity of beauty. Perhaps the positive evaluation of being which is imposed upon us by its being transcendentally good is more like an aesthetic judgement than a moral one. This, it should be mentioned, is not a view that I attribute to Aquinas, but merely one way of making sense of the distinction between the moral and the metaphysical good. If one were to pursue this line of reasoning, however, additional work must be done in order to clarify the relation between the metaphysical good and beauty. This investigation falls outside the scope of my present topic. Let us for this reason return to the topic of the theodicy.

It is understandable that the coextensionality of ‘being’ and ‘good’ should play a theodical role, since the view of these terms as coextentional presupposes another doctrine, namely the widely accepted privation theory of evil. Aquinas, for instance, acknowledged this logical relation in his Disputed Questions on Truth, when he stated that it is possible for being and good to be convertible since evil is privation of being.\textsuperscript{19} For if being were divisible into good and evil, ‘good’ and

\textsuperscript{18} The most down-to-earth example being cases of “This is a good pencil”. As Thomson (2008, p. 20) has remarked, items such as pencils are function-kinds, and “to be good qua member of one [such kind], is to be a member of [one such kind] that performs the appropriate function well”.

\textsuperscript{19} The mutual implications of the privation theory of (metaphysical) evil and the convertibility of being and good was acknowledged by Aquinas in De veritate, q. 21 a. 2 arg. 6 (1980, p. 123), when he formulated this objection against his own position in the following:
‘being’ could obviously not be coextensional terms. If good is to be
transcendental, (metaphysical) evil must be non-being.

That the privation theory of evil, in turn, was regarded as a powerful argument in
the defence of God’s omnipotence and goodness is testified to historically by the
fact that in Augustine’s case, the doctrine of evil as privatio boni provided him
with a rebuttal against the Manicheans, who conceived of good (and divine) and
evil (and “demonic”) as two positive forces locked in combat. The doctrine was
again coopted in Catholic polemics against the Albigensians. In essence, this
motive - to demote evil from an ontological standing equal to that of the good -
derpinned the doctrine of a transcendental good.

Spinoza, as we shall see, rejected the notion of a transcendental good. Yet he put
this rejection, along with the transcendental standing of perfection, to a theodicial
use which, although radically different, bears surprising resemblances to the
theological project of previous thinkers.

1.3. Spinoza’s position on the transcendentals.

There are three explicit mentions of the transcendental terms in Spinoza’s oeuvre.
I will begin with these passages, and then uncover other passages, where
transcendentals are at work more tacitly.

First, in the CM 1.6, Spinoza not only explicitly rejects the transcendentals unum,
verum, bonum, but even seems to insinuate that the scholastics themselves, the
“metaphysicians”, as he calls them, have a disingenuous or contrived belief in
transcendentals (“for they say that every being is one, true and good, even though
no one thinks of these things”: [quamvis nemo de iis cogit]: C. 311). Second, in
the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (henceforward TTP), Spinoza briefly uses an
unidentified transcendental term as an example of a futile explanation. Third,

\[\text{\footnotesize ing words: “Praeterea, divisum non convertitur cum aliquo dividentium, sicut animal cum rationali. Sed ens dividitur per bonum et malum, cum multa entia mala dicantur. Ergo bonum et ens non convertuntur.”} \]

\[\text{\footnotesize Aertsen (2012, p. 112) emphasizes how polemic against the Albigensians motivated Philip the Chancellor in his formulation of the doctrine of a transcendental good.} \]

\[\text{\footnotesize “By what laws of nature was this [revelation] made? I confess I don’t know. I could say, as others do, that it was made by the power of God. But then it would look like I was} \]
Spinoza rejects the epistemic value of the transcendentals *ens, res* and *aliquid* in 2p40s1 of his *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*. Taken together, these passages succeed in rejecting *all* six Thomist transcendentals: *ens, res, aliquid, unum, bonum, verum*. As 2p40s1 makes explicit, Spinoza’s rejection of transcendentals is intimately linked with his rejection of universals.

For Spinoza, universals are a species of beings of reason (*entia rationis*). Hence, in order to understand Spinoza’s dismissal of the universals, we need to look more closely at his concept of being of reason.

In the first chapter of the CM, Spinoza sets out to discuss which division of being is apt. Spinoza’s major point in this section is that since non-being is a negation of being, being “is badly divided into being and non-being.” In other words, non-being is not a division within being, but the complement of being. In this section, he deals with three kinds of non-beings. These are: chimaeras (impossible beings, such as the square circle), fictitious beings (invented beings, such as the phoenix) and beings of reason. Beings of reason differ from *chimaerae* and fictions in that they have an important function in the regulation of our reason. Spinoza states that such beings are “modes of thinking” by which we “retain, explain and imagine” things (C. 299–300).

The beings of reason by which we explain things are number, measure and time. In Letter 12, Spinoza calls these “tools of the imagination” (*auxilia imaginationis*: G IV/57-58). Spinoza would not dispute that, say, operations on numbers increase our knowledge of mathematics. But although this knowledge is necessary for the advancement of science as well as for the coordination of everyday life, Spinoza insists it is not ontologically solid: it does not adequately reflect what is. Our higher capacity for acquiring ontologically solid knowledge - a capacity Spinoza most often refers to as *the intellect*, rather than reason - does not predominate in scientific pursuits of this kind. So, logic, for example, which on Spinoza’s view deals in beings of reason used for the retention of things, trains the memory, but not the intellect (C. 299).

---

Just babbling. That would be like trying to explain the form of a singular thing by some transcendental term. For all things are made through the power of God” (C. II. 92).
Universals are exactly the kinds of beings of reason we use to retain things. For they arise from a psychologically inevitable process in which we abstract from the distinctive features of individuals in order to retain only “what they all agree in” (2p40s1). This occurs whenever the images we want to retain exceed the capacity of our imagination, and so only an abstract residue is retained in their places, for example the concept horse or man. Since an infinite intellect, unlike a finite intellect, has no need for mnemotechnic devices such as universals, the idea of a universal is not properly speaking in God’s infinite intellect as one of its own intentional objects, but is rather present in the divine mind only insofar as God knows the mind in which the universal is formed. Therefore, God is denied knowledge of universals per se, as Spinoza points out in CM, II,7.

Reasoning by the means of beings of reason, to which universals belong, while evidently indispensable for theoretical and practical purposes alike, does not carve reality at its joints and should therefore be excluded from metaphysics insofar as it is the science of being.²²

The origin of the transcendentalts is no different from that of the universals, for the terms we call transcendentials too “arise from the fact that the human Body, being

²² How can there be in human sciences modes of thought that are not paralleled by modes of being? Does not Spinoza’s doctrine of parallelism (“the order and connection” of ideas and things being identical: 2p7) require that each idea be paralleled by a thing? I cannot discuss this issue in detail here.

But even if this difficulty can be resolved, Spinoza’s classification of time, number and measure among beings of reasons still calls out for explanation. Is there no knowledge of time, number and measure in God’s knowledge of how finite things cause each other to exist? Surely there must be a conception of causal succession when God conceives of each thing’s existence (1p28). Since Spinoza never retracts the view that time, number or measure are merely aids of the imagination it would seem that we have to bite the bullet here. The way in which God conceives of the causal order of nature does not involve time, number or measure, but must, logically speaking, nonetheless comprise some atemporal notion of causal priority. I do thus not agree with the reading of 4p62s which Frankena (1977, p. 37) advances. According to Frankena, this scholium indicates that Spinoza thinks that “our judgments about the order of things and the connection of causes are imaginary rather than real”. But what is imaginary about the order and the connection of causes in 4p62s is not the causal order per se, but rather how it can bring benefit (or harm) in the present moment. It is the division of duration into past, present and future that is the work of the imagination, not the causal order obtaining among things. I cannot here defend the consistency of the notion of a causal, yet atemporal, order.
limited, is capable of forming distinctly only a certain number of images at the same time” (2p40s1, G. II/120). When the number of images we can clearly perceive is massively superseded, we form a transcendental - a universal which is confused to the highest degree; an attenuated abstract concept under which we conveniently subsume all particulars, while ignoring not only the small differences (parvulas differentias) which characterize the particulars, but even more coarse-grained generalizations such as horse or man.

This is the standard understanding of Spinoza’s dismissal of universals and transcendentals. It is certainly correct. However, in order to give a coherent interpretation of the position of the transcendentals which Spinoza’s system deploys - not only his professed views in 2p40s1 - it is necessary to take into account four difficulties that problematize the straightforward picture that is immediately apparent from the surface of the text. The first three difficulties I will mention pose problems for readers who deny Spinoza’s subscription to any transcendental, and therefore favor my interpretation. In contrast, the fourth difficulty poses a challenge for my investigation, but a challenge which I believe can be overcome.

First, in the place of the Latin “terms called transcendentals” [Termi

transcendentales dicti] the margin text of the NS23 has Supratransedentales, not transcendentals. However, the implications of this alternative have not been fully drawn in secondary literature.24 Let us begin with clarifying the notion of a supertranscendental. While transcendental terms apply to everything that is, insofar as it is, the range of the supertranscendentals extends beyond the realm of what has being. Normally, the range of the supertranscendentals was regarded as what is thinkable, which includes beings of reason, and for some authors even chimaeras.25

---

23 The Nagelate Schriften (NS) is the Dutch manuscripts of Spinoza’s works. The Dutch term which the margin text glosses as ‘Supratransedentales’ is ‘overklimmende’.
24 Yet, as Vona (1960, parte 2, pp. 87–94) has pointed out, it is vital to know which kind of term is under attack here.
25 For a fuller account of which terms the class of supertranscendentals were taken to comprise, see Doyle (2012).
On my view, it is significant that the terms Spinoza uses as examples of
transcendentals (ens, res, aliquid) in 2p40s1 can be construed as
supertranscendentals. This would not be the case if Spinoza had used the good
(bonum) as an example of a transcendental to be dismissed.

For in abstracting from the specific characteristics of any particular, we will come
to think of it as a being, as a thing, or as something. Consider the example of
something. While it is the case that for any thought, there is something which the
thought intends (although that something does not necessarily have extramental
existence), it is clearly not true of any object of thought, rendered maximally
formal by the process of abstraction, that it is necessarily good. In other words,
the alternative reading of the NS exists because it is equally possible to dismiss
the transcendentals and the supertranscendentals as structural (transcendental in
the Kantian sense of the word) features of any thought, robbed of the small
differences of the real particular as well as more coarse-grained generalizations
that will allow a finite mind to retain an abstract residue of the particular in
question. If it is true that such abstractions can never truly render reality then
‘being’, ‘thing’ and ‘something’, can all be dismissed on the same grounds as the
universals.

This does not prove, however, that transcendentals that are not so easily
confounded with supertranscendentals as ens, res, and aliquid, are not
coeextensional with being. In particular, the thought of a metaphysical good is
certainly not reached by the process of successive abstraction of thought content.
This shows that transcendentals is not straightforwardly rejected in 2p40s1. For
being is rejected - on minimalist grounds - as a most confused and general notion
only when it is considered to be being in general, the substratum that you reach by
successively abstracting layers of meaningful content from a thought. But hereby
the being particular to some concrete thing is not rejected.

Of course, Spinoza rejects the other transcendentals (unum, verum, bonum) in the
early text CM, I, 6. These transcendentals could not be confused with

---
26 Emanuela Scribano's (1990, p. 31) comparison with Suárez is illuminating; for Suárez
negations, privations and (some) extrinsic relations are beings of reason, and yet these
supertranscendentals. However, in this chapter I will suggest that in spite of this passage, Spinoza, in his *Ethics*, nonetheless subscribes to at least one transcendental property of (concrete) being: perfection.

Second, it is to be expected of a philosopher who considers ‘being’ to be an extremely confused generalization, that she should deal as little as possible with the notion of being and put it to zero use in her metaphysics. For instance, analytical ontologists who are critical of any mismatch between ontology and quantification, do not employ a thick concept of being systematically in their own philosophies. Instead of speaking of what being is, they might speak, as does Quine, of the beings there are, of what there is. Nor was Spinoza obliged by his time to enlist the concept of being in his system; it appears that contemporary corpuscularians (such as Hobbes or Gassendi) did not. And yet, in spite of 2p40s1, Spinoza puts the notion of being to use in his metaphysics; he amply uses not only *ens*, but also *esse*, and even (once) *essendi*. As 1p24c shows, Spinoza finds it meaningful to speak of what is true of being across the board irrespective of the small differences that individuate particular beings (in this corollary, Spinoza states that God is the “cause of the being [*esse*] of things”). This has bearing on the first point made. Spinoza can, with impunity, use a term he rejects in 2p40s1, namely being, because he uses it in a concrete, rather than in an abstract sense.

Consider that in 1p30, Spinoza interestingly mentions what seems to be a cognitive imperative. He says: “The actual intellect, whether finite or infinite, must comprehend [*comprehendere debet*] God’s attributes and God’s affections, and nothing else”. If ‘comprehension’ is here interpreted to mean ‘adequate knowledge’, the following picture emerges. For Spinoza, adequate knowledge supervenes on being in the sense that we cannot have adequate knowledge about anything apart from what really is; we cannot genuinely grasp something unless there is something there for us to grasp. But the only things there are are God and his modes. Since Spinoza can help himself to the term ‘being’ in order to explicate his metaphysics (the point just made), this indicates that ‘being’ can be

---

three transcendentals are not (for Suárez) beings of reason, even though *one* is a negation and *good* and *truth* are (extrinsic) relations of the being in question to the will and to the intellect, respectively. Such a position Spinoza would deem untenable.
used concretely to denote the being of what there is, i.e. the being of God and his
types. Unlike the being we arrive at by successively abstracting content from the
thought of something, when predicated of substance or its modes, being is
ontologically solid.

Third, Spinoza regards being or reality as coextensional with an intensionally
different term, perfection (see, for instance, 1p11s; 2p5; 2d6; 2p43s and 4Pref).
These passages clearly indicate that for Spinoza there is at least one predicate that
is true of what is, insofar as it is. Nothing else is necessary for a philosophy to
entertain a transcendental property of being. If Spinoza treats being as convertible
with another term, he is by definition inquiring into the “affections” or “passions”
of being, and, it would seem, engaging in a version of the Scholastic metaphysical
praxis which he repudiated in the CM.

Fourth, as we have stated, transcendental terms are terms which are coextensive
(if not cointensional) with being. Just as being runs through all the categories of
things, so do transcendental terms such as the metaphysical good. When Aquinas
paradigmatically denies that being is a genus, he enables for the transcendental
terms (defined as terms coextensional with being) to have a similar super-generic
character. Goodness is not restricted to one category but is to be found in all the
categories specified by Aristotle, as well as in the being not subjected to the
categories - that is, in the being of God.

In the preface to the fourth part of the Ethics, by contrast, Spinoza makes the
following remark: “for we are accustomed to refer all individuals in Nature to one
genus, which is called the most general, i.e., to the notion of being” (C. 545).

This is problematic, for, as we have seen, the notion of a transcendental good
depends on the notion of transcendental being: being which “transcends” the

---

27 As he does in in SCG I, cap. 25, n. 6 (1975, p. 127), in the following words: “If being
were a genus we should have to find a difference through which to contract it to a species.
But no difference shares in the genus in such a way that the genus is included in the no-
tion of the difference, for thus the genus would be included twice in the definition of the
species. Rather, the difference is outside what is understood in the nature of the genus.
But there can be nothing that is outside that which is understood by being, if being is
included in the concept of the things of which it is predicated. Thus, being cannot be con-
tracted by any difference. Being is, therefore, not a genus.”
categories. If being *is* a genus, however, then it is clearly not super-generic in nature, nor can the transcendentals be defined, in this framework, as terms that “transcend” - that is, indiscriminately run through and (in the case of God’s supercategorical being) beyond all the categories.\(^{28}\) Is this remark of Spinoza’s an objection to the project I am about to undertake? I cannot attack the problem in detail here, but I will outline two lines of defense, (a) and (b), to the effect that I think I can go on with the investigation anyway.

(a) The statement in question is a cursory remark on how we are wont to speak of being as the most general genus, under which all things fall. The text does not commit Spinoza to this view. (b) Being might be generic for Spinoza without this dealing a fatal blow to my project. For substance monism entails that all being ultimately belongs in the member of one category, in the one member of the category substance. The being of modes is just the being of this one substance, modified somehow. It may be that, on Spinoza’s view, being no longer runs *through* all the categories, but is instead concentrated in *one* member of *one* category, namely that of substance. Yet, even if being is taken as an ultimately intracategorical concept, this does not alter all that much: any name that is coextensional, but not cointensional, with being, can still be called a transcendental within this framework.

In what follows I will investigate the fate of the most ethically relevant transcendental, namely that of the good, in Spinoza’s philosophy.

1.4. *Spinoza’s rejection of the good as a transcendental.*

Spinoza officially demotes the good from its position as a transcendental in CM I, 6. But that the good should not be able to play the role of a transcendental in Spinoza’s philosophy is apparent from his entire oeuvre. For nowhere in the Spinozist corpus is the good glossed as a term convertible with being, or evil, relatedly, as the objective privation of some good that is due to the thing in question.

\(^{28}\) This “commonality” is in itself a complex issue. Aquinas, for instance, distinguished between a commonality of being on the basis of predication [*per praedicationem*] and causality [*per causalitatem*]. See Courtine (1990, pp. 44–7).
Indeed, Spinoza’s writings on good and evil make it clear why the good must be dethroned in this way. For Spinoza, as is well known, is critical of what one could call the hegemony of the good which had dominated the history of Western philosophy. He denies that the values of good and evil have any solid metaphysical foundation, and, as a result, the kind of convertibility with being that would make either good (simply) or both good and evil (disjunctively) transcendental terms. Rather than reflecting what really is, good and evil are “beings of reason” or “modes of thinking” (KV, C. 53). In the Ethics, Spinoza more disparagingly calls them “modes of imagining” (Iapp). As such they fail to characterize reality.

Traditionally (for instance in the argument of Boethius surveyed above), the appetite for the good inherent in “all things” was explained by reference to their being good. For Spinoza, no such explanation is at hand. This means that he must chart a different genealogy for our appetite for what appears good. This is accomplished in 4d1 and 4d2, where Spinoza champions a subjectivist understanding of good and evil, according to which good and evil are subjective judgments of utility and disutility, respectively.

Thus Spinoza not only rejects a foundation for the good in the fabric of reality, but he also, relatedly, rejects that the good qua good exerts any special psychological motivational force on humans. On the contrary, Spinoza asserts, “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” (3p9s). While the philosophical tradition spearheaded by Aquinas had taken Aristotle’s definition of the good as that which everyone desires to mean that fundamentally, we desire something because we find it good,29 Spinoza

29In De Malo, q. 1. art. 1, resp. 61 (2001), Aquinas relies on the synonymity of the good and the desirable to design an explanation for why the ultimately desirable is also the creator of all things: “[…] since the desirable moves desire, and the first cause of movement is necessarily unmoved, the first and universal efficient cause is necessarily itself the first and universal desirable thing, that is, the first and universal good, which produces all things because of the love of its very self [appetitum sui ipsius].”

The identity of good and desirable is also to be found in for example, Descartes and Duns Scotus, who both regard the will as naturally inclined towards the good – towards the good and the true in the case of Descartes, and towards happiness (affectio commodi) and justice (affectio iustitiae) in the case of Scotus. See Hoffman (2012, p. 26)
inverted the causality that, Aquinas and others attributed to Aristotle’s definition: rather than desiring something because it is good, Spinoza maintained that we find something good because we desire it.

Not only did Spinoza subvert this definition by subscribing to it in a radical way, he also maintained that the standard way of defining our appetite as naturally tending towards the good had had disastrous consequences. For the delusional belief in finality, which, on Spinoza’s view, corrupts theology and anthropology alike (as he explains in the Appendix to the first part of the Ethics), stems from the original error which consists in our dislodging of the good from our desire, in the illusion that we want it on account of its goodness. First, we fool ourselves that we act on account of the good as such, and then, we ascribe, by the dubiously applied intellectual tool of analogy, the same teleological character to the activity of God. But that God should act on account of some end other than himself is all but blasphemous to Spinoza.

As a consequence, it would be expected that Spinoza should deny that the good could be an absolute value whose promotion could be inculcated categorically in humans. That is, it would seem that if the values of good and evil were only functions of the relative usefulness of things, people and circumstances to some specific subject (as Spinoza asserts in 4d1 and 4d2), it would be very unlikely for there to be any universally commendable good. (It being unlikely is not the same as it being impossible, of course).

Surprisingly, perhaps, while Spinoza initially recognizes that at different times, different courses of action are to be recommended to different people - such as music being “good for the melancholy, bad for the one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to the one who is deaf” (4Pref), in the end, he nonetheless promotes a highest good (sumnum bonum) relative to the mind: “Knowledge of God is the Mind’s greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know God” (4p28). This knowledge gives rise to an intellectual love of God (5p33).

160). Here I cannot even pretend to give the long marriage of the good and desire or will the full background the topic deserves.
On the one hand, Spinoza thus presents what appears to be an entirely relativistic theory of the good. On the other hand, he promotes a universal highest good for the mind. In order for these two viewpoints to be reconciled in one ethical system, Spinoza evidently needs a theory of human beings such that the highest good must be maximally useful for everyone, regardless of their circumstances. Differently put, there must be some desire or need, common to all, that intellectual love of God best satisfies.

Spinoza explains the desire for knowledge, and ultimately intellectual love of, God uniquely satisfies in his difficult conatus-doctrine. According to the conatus-doctrine, each of us, indeed everything, inevitably strives after perseveration in being: “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power [quantum in se est], strives to persevere in its being [esse]” (3p6). It is this striving (conatus) after being that knowledge of God best satisfies.

The question to be asked is why our essential desire aims at being in the first place. What is so good about being, if being is not intrinsically good? In the philosophical tradition which preceded Spinoza, the good served a twofold role in explaining the striving of all beings. The orientation of what is towards the good was explained by the fact that all being was considered good, and the desirability of what all things strived after was explained by its being good (indeed, the supreme good rather than the transcendental good - but this need not concern us now). Since Spinoza has effectively abandoned both these approaches, he owes us an explanation as to why we should want being. What accounts for the normative force of being in Spinoza’s philosophy? 31

---

30 It is no accident that Spinoza uses the same expression (in quantum in se est), as the one which Descartes, in his Principles, formulated his version of the law of inertia: “Prima lex naturae: quod unaqueque res, quantum in se est, semper in eodem statu perseveret; sicque quod semel movetur, semper moveri pergat” (1905, vol. 8, p. 62). Spinoza wants to formulate a law of mental inertia.

31 Andrew Youpa (2009, pp. 242–57) has suggested that the good, for Spinoza, is eternity. Clearly eternity maximizes one’s being. But on account of what should one want maximal being, if being is not good, and if the good has no motivational force as such anyway?
1.5. Ontological versus teleological perfection.

I believe that the answer to the question of what accounts for the normative force of being in Spinoza’s philosophy is to be found in his, remarkably traditional, transcendental doctrine of perfection. Being is worthy of pursuit since it is coextensional with perfection. In this, Spinoza’s account is no different than that of Aquinas’s. Yet, Spinoza breaks with tradition in that even if we genuinely strive after persevering in being (esse), as the conatus-doctrine specifies, we do not thereby strive after the good: for the good as such has no intrinsic connection with being. Instead we strive after what is good - that is useful for us - in our pursuit to maximally persevere in our being, that is, in our perfection. Since knowledge of God is categorically prescribed it means that it alone best serves this purpose.

At this point, it must be acknowledged that there is textual evidence against my reading of transcendental perfection in Spinozism. Most notably, in the Preface to the fourth part of the Ethics, Spinoza assimilates the concepts of perfection and imperfection to the concepts of good and evil. In this preface, the genealogy of the concepts of perfection and imperfection is traced. Initially, we used ‘imperfection’ only of what we knew with certainty did not live up to its standard - such as an incomplete house, where we knew what the intended model was.

But, after men began to form universal ideas, and devise models of houses, buildings, towers, etc., 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 (4app).

On this understanding, perfection is as it were in the eyes of the beholder. Such perfection lacks ontological ground. Let us call this notion teleological perfection.

It is important to realize that Spinoza’s readiness to dismantle the adequacy of our judgments of teleological perfection and imperfection, and good and evil, can be traced back to his criticism of universals. If there is no universal man or stone that we can take as a model for our assessment of individual specimens, we cannot properly uphold a standard for how they must be in order not to be considered
deprived of their due perfections. For Spinoza, the teleologically perfect and
imperfect are, like good and evil, merely comparative terms by which humans
assess the satisfaction of their standards. This becomes evident when, using the
stock example of a man who is overcome by his “appetite for sensual pleasure”
instead of acting in accordance with reason, Spinoza suggests that “we compare
his present appetite with that which is in the pious, or with that which he had at
another time” (Letter 21 to Blijenbergh, C. 377). The standard against which we
evaluate his action is the universal of moral perfection that we have formed by
generalizing how people we judge pious act. Thus, Spinoza contends that evil
functions as a relative concept by the means of which we explain to what extent
human behavior lives up to the universal of teleological (moral) perfection.

Elsewhere, however, Spinoza equates perfection and reality. Consider, for instance
2d6: “By reality and perfection I understand the same thing.” Since the
consequences of this equation are needed at earlier junctures, however, this
definition is anticipated in the first part as well: “Perfection, therefore, does not
take away the existence of a thing, but on the contrary asserts it. But imperfection
takes it away” (1p11s). Indeed, at structurally crucial junctures - such as in 1p16d
- Spinoza seems to anticipate that perfection is convertible with being, or reality -
that is, that something has perfection to the very extent that it has being.

1p16 and its demonstration is the passage where Spinoza intends to show how
everything follows with necessity from the divine nature. Within the Ethics, the
deductive progeny of 1p16 speaks for itself, as any index of references to claims
in Spinoza’s Ethics will show. It is clearly one of the propositions at the core of
the Ethics’ argumentative structure. As far as I can see, this proposition depends
on the following three premises: (1) Spinoza’s understanding of the (essential)
properties of things as being deducible from their essences. He formulates this
presupposition in the following words: “This Proposition must be plain to anyone,
provided he attends to the fact that the intellect infers from the given definition of
any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (i.e.,
from the essence of the thing”) (Emphasis added.). Spinoza considers good
definitions as being genetic (and more exactly, as stating the “proximate cause” of
the thing: TIE [96] C. 39). 32 The Euclidean rule for constructing a circle “as the figure that is described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other moveable” (TIE [96] C. 40) is on Spinoza’s view an example of a definition of a thing such that its essential properties are all deducible from it. 33 However, when real things (rather than geometrical entities) are defined, the properties deducible from them are exactly the ones that their essences have the power to cause. 34 (2) The definition of God in 1d6, and (3) “that [the intellect] infers more properties the more definition of the thing expresses reality, i.e. the more reality the essence of the thing involves.” If it can be assumed that (at least genuine, and presumably intrinsic) properties are perfections, then it is plain that the claim that being and perfection always co-vary is already implied by the third premise.

Be that as it may. In 1p11s and 2d6, it becomes patent that for Spinoza being is co-extensional with perfection. For the perfection Spinoza refers to in these passages is clearly ontological: it consists in the reality of something, where the ascription of reality is in no way implied to be constituted by its relation to a beholder. For instance, it is not a matter of perspective whether God or my favourite singer enjoys most being, or perfection.

There is no other way of squaring these two incompatible uses of the word ‘perfection’, except by a clear-cut distinction between ontological and teleological perfection in Spinoza, where only the former is convertible with being. Things are not more or less ontologically “perfect […] because they are of use to, or are incompatible with, human nature”, although this is exactly what makes them more or less teleologically perfect (1app, II/83). 35

32 While Spinoza in TIE does not consider the definition of God to state his cause, he later (in Letter 60) came to consider any essential definition of God as being genetic or causal (Melamed [2013b, 109]).
33 In a recent paper Carriero (2019) has commented on how Spinoza models his notion of (good) essential definitions upon “Euclidean construction procedures”. “Spinoza’s Three Kinds of Cognition: Imagination, Understanding, and Definition and Essence in the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect”.
34 For a detailed study of Spinoza’s doctrine of causally efficacious essences, see Viljanen (2011).
35 My proposal can be contrasted with the following assessment due to Rice (1977, p. 105): “On Spinoza’s own terms there can be no bifurcation of perfection into metaphysical and moral”. One may want to situate Spinoza this bifurcation in a contemporary ethi-
It is customary to think of perfection as a concept defined at least partially teleologically - indeed, the etymology of the word invites us to do so. By the means of his distinction, Spinoza effectively breaks with a conception according to which (ontological) perfection is defined at least in part teleologically, as a state that sets in when something has reached its proper end. While teleological perfection is said to obtain when we judge that something has reached its end or met its standard, ontological perfection is not a function of the judgments of finite creatures. But what, then, is ontological perfection predicated on? The answer to this question should ideally provide us with the resources of explaining what sets ontological perfection apart from the transcendental Spinoza criticizes elsewhere.

In 1p33, Spinoza states that God’s production of things (“modes”) is necessitated by his nature. It is in a scholium to the proposition in question, that Spinoza infers that the transcendental of (ontological) perfection is true of all being because it results from God’s nature: “things have been produced by God with the highest perfection, since they have followed necessarily from a given most perfect nature” (1p33s2: Emphasis added; cf. 1app[II, 80]). Just as, on the Boethian view, everything was considered good insofar as it had being, since its being flowed from the first good, so on Spinoza’s view, any being which follows necessarily from God’s nature has ontological perfection. And so does all being. Of course, the property in the Spinozist case is not the good, but (ontological) perfection;

cal debate by having Spinoza answer what Thomson (2008), following work by Peter Geach (1967), has called the Goodness Thesis. There can be a property, goodness, such that all good things share in it, only if goodness is a predicative, rather than an attributive property. On Spinoza’s view, teleological perfection is attributive, but ontological perfection is arguably predicative.

I am not claiming that this common conception represents tradition. Aquinas’s doctrine of perfection is, for example, clearly causal. Aquinas’s dictum that causes - also efficient causes - act insofar as they are perfect [inquantum perfectum] shows that his understanding of perfection is not exclusively teleological. The difference between Spinoza, on the one hand, and a tradition here represented by Aquinas, on the other, is that perfection lacks entirely the teleological dimension which Aquinas outlines in, for example., ST I, q. 5, art. 1 and art. 3 (1980b, pp. 190-191). I thank Igor Agostini for raising this issue.

“Most perfect” here, I take to be synonymous with “supremely perfect”, a locution Spinoza uses elsewhere. It should be emphasized that, in Spinoza’s work, only the absolutely infinite being, God, is called “supremely perfect” (summe perfectus) tout court (the phrase occurs in KV, II, Ch. 18; CM II, 2; Letter 2, Letter 60 and in the Ethics in 1p11d. It may also be inferred that Spinoza thinks of God as supremely perfect from 1p33s2). God’s attributes, by contrast, are not normally called supremely perfect tout court, but supremely perfect in their kind (in suo genere). See, for instance, Letter 11.
nonetheless, Spinoza argues in a way remarkably similar to Boethius (and Aquinas, to the extent that he endorsed Boethius’ reasoning). This is striking, given the often-emphasized revolutionary character of Spinoza’s philosophy.

Yet, while there is remarkable structural similarity, the content of Spinoza’s proposal is significantly different from that of the Boethian tradition. Whereas, traditionally, the goodness of things is rooted in the goodness of the creator; on Spinoza’s view, the perfection of things is rooted in the perfection of the divine nature. But what is this nature?

Importantly, Spinoza claims that God’s nature is identical with his (causal) power (1p34). Spinoza’s understanding of causality is univocal. More precisely, God causes modes not only in the same sense but also by the very same activity as that by which modes cause each other (see 1p25).\(^3\) It is for this reason, I take it, that God’s causal power - that is, his nature - is expressed by the modes (1p36d). Yet, since the causal activity among God’s modes is hierarchically structured, some modes are themselves less causally efficacious than others. This does not imperil their ontological perfection, however. For Aquinas (at one stage of his intellectual development, at least), divine goodness is better represented by the whole of creation than by any individual creature.\(^3\) For Spinoza, by contrast, the greatest perfection is the one possessed by God’s nature/power, but that power is exercised (rather than being merely represented) by beings whose respective powers are capable of producing any number of effects ranging between the minuscule,

---

\(^3\) This prima facie contradicts Spinoza’s theory that God only causes modes immanently, not transitively. But ‘God’ is here a shorthand for ‘God, insofar as he is not considered to be modified by any finite mode’. Thus understood, the inconsistency is avoided.

\(^3\) See ST, I, q. 47, art. 1 (2011, p. 489-490) and Ibid., q. 48, art. 2, co. For a brief comment on this “balance between diversity and unity”, see Pruss (2011, p. 284).

For Leibniz, similarly, perfection is the greatest quantity of essence or the greatest possible number of composite beings. In an early text, Leibniz calls it “the principle of harmony among things; that is, that the greatest amount of essence that can exist, does exist” (1992). For yet another formulation of this principle see “On the ultimate origination of things”, where Leibniz states that “[p]erfection or degree of essence (through which the greatest number of things are composable) is the principle of existence” (2001, p. 34). Of course, Leibniz’s technical definition of metaphysical perfection and its evolution through time is a topic that falls well outside the scope of this paper. Newlands (2010) has compared the theories of perfection in Spinoza and Leibniz. Here as elsewhere (e.g. 2017, pp. 269-70), Newlands treats metaphysical perfection as without any normative significance, and in this respect his reading differs from mine.
hardly perceptible ones, to the ones on a cosmic scale. In both cases, metaphysical perfection is a kind of tradeoff between infinity and finitude. Just as for Aquinas every individual need not evince supreme goodness in order for creation as a whole to be good, so for Spinoza each individual being need not enjoy the greatest imaginable causal power, only the one possible given the causal structure in which it is embedded. It is the structure as a whole which manifests God’s supreme perfection. Yet, to belong to this pattern each being must make a minimal contribution, that is, every real being must have at least one effect. Spinoza states this explicitly in the last proposition of the first part of the Ethics:

Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow. Dem: Whatever exists expresses the nature, or essence of God in a certain and determinate way (by 25C), that is. (by P34), whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God, which is the cause of all things. So (by P16), from [NS: everything that exists] some effect must follow, q.e.d.

It is God’s infinitely efficacious nature which explains why perfection is predicated transcendentally of all that is, insofar as it is. Everything that is, is perfect, because everything that is necessarily acts as a cause, and the activity whereby it so acts is the very same thing as God’s nature but expressed in “given conditioned manner” (for the latter phrase, see 3p6d). God’s nature and power are one and the same thing. And since it is infinite, that nature/power instantiates perfection maximally. By each carrying out some, but not all, of God’s acts, all beings participate in this perfection.

Whereas subjective perfection arises from universals where too many images coagulate together to engender a blurred “super-image” (the idea, say of a perfect body), the idea of ontological perfection is engendered by an adequate idea of God’s absolutely infinite nature, as equaling his infinite productivity. This explains why the idea of ontological perfection, although it is an idea of what is common to all that is, can still be adequate. Its genealogy is not the same as that of universals, since it does not arise from an imaginative overload, but from the intellect’s true perception of the divine essence.
1.6. Ethical consequences.

Let us summarize the results reached so far. Reality, or being, is convertible with ontological perfection and with causal efficacy. Of course, all individuals are not equally causally efficacious, but since Spinoza’s theory accommodates a gradation of being, this is not problematic. Greater reality/perfection will be proportional to greater causal efficacy. But as long as something has at least one effect, it is real and ontologically perfect.

Do universals in general, and the idea of teleological perfection in particular, exert some effect? If they do, they are, to that extent, real and perfect. Certainly, for Spinoza, universals considered in themselves, in abstraction from the (causally determined) concatenation of ideas in which they occur, do not correspond to any real extramental particular (or “singular thing”). In this sense, Spinoza is clearly a nominalist.

Yet, whether adequate or inadequate, for Spinoza, ideas qua modes will have to result in (mental) effects which are also mirrored in extension, in virtue of parallelism. (Parallelism is, roughly speaking, the doctrine that to every idea, there corresponds an extended mode. Spinoza endorses this view in 2p7.)

Although we would fail to map the idea of a universal to any specific singular thing in extension, the idea itself nonetheless exerts some causal influence, in that at least one idea must follow from it. Thus, to the extent that we allow that there is such a thing as transcendentally predicated ontological perfection, and that it has the characteristic of being convertible with causal efficacy, ideas of teleological perfection are ontologically perfect, and therefore they have being. While there is nothing that ideas of universals are of, the ideas themselves are perfect to the degree that they have being.

This results in some rarely noted, highly interesting consequences for Spinoza’s ethical thinking.

40Melamed (2013a) has convincingly shown that in 2p7 and its scholium Spinoza defends not one, but two, different parallelisms, but presently only the one between ideas and extended modes is of interest.
Just as God’s nature is the same as his power, so for human beings, their nature and causal power is the same. This power Spinoza also refers to in terms of virtue (4d8; 4p20). Unlike God, humans are finite and composite, and so they may fail to exert their power. The reality or perfection of a thing will be proportional to the causality it does exert. If we consider the causal efficacy of human minds that think conventionally in the terms of universals, their causality will be explained at least partially by these universals. For instance, the fact that Lucy is motivated by the thought of a teleologically perfect body is the reason why she has plastic surgery done. But let us say Lucy, a highly impressionable reader, has read the *Ethics*, and now becomes more interested in ontological perfection. Without going into the details of Spinoza’s theory of how affects are to be played out against other affects therapeutically (outlined in 4p7), let us say that in Lucy’s mind, the concept of ontological perfection is now accompanied by a stronger affect than that of teleological perfection. Then she realizes that the causal efficacy of anything is necessarily perfect, since it is a partial manifestation of God’s necessary efficacy. If Lucy truly embraces ontological perfection as what is most worthy of pursuit, will she not then be bound to affirm whatever causality she is already necessitated to exert, even if this causality is partially explained by universals? Will she not be compelled to say that, whatever limited power or virtue I have, it is real insofar as I strive to remain in being, even if I strive to do so with all my false beliefs and distorted views? Will she not be compelled to affirm the ontological perfection of her (inadequate) idea of teleological perfection, which had some reality and hence some ontological perfection in that it was causally efficacious, after all?  

41 A related problem is whether the striving of our inadequate ideas is part of the striving that characterizes us essentially. This problem is related to whether the Spinozist conatus is striving to maintain in actual or formal essence. Perhaps an interpretation of Spinoza can be given according to which the formal essences of things contain only affirmations (albeit not an absolute affirmation, unless they are God), and therefore only activity and consequently only adequate ideas. In this case, it is the actual, but not the formal, essence that Spinoza defines in 3p3d (“The first thing that constitutes the essence of the mind is nothing else but the idea of the body actually existing [2p11 and 2p13], which idea is composed of other ideas (2p15), of which some are adequate (2p38c) while others are inadequate (2p29c; cf. 3p9d.)

If, by contrast, the conatus that characterizes us essentially is striving to maintain in our actual essence, it would seem that the perfection we can acquire is predicated on
The question can be put more suggestively in this way: What kind of effects will the idea of ontological perfection result in? If it has no effects, then the idea of ontological perfection is itself not real or (ontologically) perfect (although it can of course still be teleologically perfect). If we grant that it has some effect, however, the effect should ideally be ethically perfecting. For how can human perfection be better construed, in Spinoza, than by the means of the fading away of the now redundant model of teleological perfection, as we tune in to the ontological perfection of reality itself, of all reality insofar as it is, in some way, God? If the thought of ontological perfection is ethically perfecting, however, then we can only aggrandize our perfection by realizing that everything is already perfect. But to cultivate an intellectual relation - perhaps one of contemplation - to what is always already necessarily perfect seems to be an astonishingly passive triumph. Since I reserve the discussion of this problem for subsequent chapters, I will be content to have noted the intriguing ethical consequence which arises from Spinoza’s dual account of perfection here.

Conclusion: A Spinozist theodicy.

I will conclude by suggesting that after the manner of a transcendental good, Spinoza’s transcendental perfection, even in the absence of a metaphysical good, plays a theological, and even theodical, role. Traditionally, predicating goodness transcendentally of all being fulfilled the theological purpose of exonerating God as the creator of what is, only insofar as it is, and hence the creator of good, only insofar as it is good. Simply put, if there is evil (and evidence seems to suggest this), it was not directly created by God, and thus God cannot be blamed for the existence of evil. By contrast, predicating ontological perfection transcendentally serves the purpose of exonerating a different kind of God. God is innocent of creating evils and other inconveniences for us, not because, ultimately, he only creates good, but because he is necessarily infinitely productive, more suggestive of a kind of senseless, mad, unstoppable, omnipresent machine - a juggernaut of the essence that we have, so that in order to acquire more perfection, we must (somehow) alter our essences.

For an ontological explication of the difference between actual and formal essence in Spinoza’s oeuvre, see Mogens Laerke (2017). The ethical and as it were soteriological impacts of this difference have yet to be explored.
creativity engendering maximal reality-perfection everywhere - than of the anthropocentric divinities Spinoza criticizes men for worshipping.

In the Appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza spells out his aversion to anthropomorphism and its distinct manner of reflecting through the category of finality. Judgments concerning the ends of things are often rooted not in knowledge, but in the prejudice of we who make these judgments, the prejudice that inclines us to think that all things are governed by appetites similar to ours, appetites of which we don’t even know the causes. Spinoza’s substitution of the good with ontological perfection furnishes us with a way of conceiving God without modeling his action on how we (wrongly, perhaps) understand our own, as taking place on account of an end. God acts necessarily from his nature, and since this nature is absolutely infinite its activity results in all and only perfection. These perfections may not be perfect in the eyes of the human beholder, but this does not make them any less perfect, ontologically speaking. Such is Spinoza’s deanthropomorphized theodicy.
Chapter 2

Spinoza’s Negation Theory of Evil and its Consequences for his Ideal of Human Perfection

Introduction.

In the previous chapter, I investigated the objective side of reality: ontological perfection which, as a transcendental, is coextensive with reality. By contrast, in this chapter I will focus on that which objectively is not. Whereas I, in the previous chapter, focused on the thesis that all perfection is reality, the present chapter is concerned with the logical obverse of that thesis, namely that no imperfection is a reality. Indeed, for Spinoza, evil is imperfection and thus lacks reality. The goal of this chapter is to understand Spinoza’s notion of evil and thereby identify the kind of human perfection which his system admits.

Of course, Spinoza was not the first to espouse such a theory of evil; the concept of evil as lack of being is rooted in Greek philosophy, was subsequently elaborated by Augustine and diffused throughout the history of medieval thought. In this chapter, I will highlight what is particular about Spinoza’s notion of evil as imperfection. I will do so by the means of comparing Spinoza’s negation theory of evil with Aquinas’s privation theory of evil.

First, I will explain the rationale of undertaking the present investigation by situating it in a contemporary debate. Second, I will determine the ontological and axiological standing of evil in Spinoza’s philosophy by comparing it to what I take to be a paradigmatic privation theory of evil, namely the one expounded by Thomas Aquinas in his Disputed Questions on Evil. Third, I will discuss the consequences of Spinoza’s position for his ethical thinking at large, in particular as concerns the status of his ideal of human perfection. Last, I will conclude by
revisiting the allegedly paradoxical character of Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection.

2.1. Contemporary context.

A theodicy is generally conceived of as a way of reconciling three (seemingly or genuinely) contradictory claims: (a) there is (a beneficent) God, (b) God is omnipotent and (c) there is evil.\(^{42}\) What would Spinoza respond to the problem that this triad of theses supposedly poses? Spinoza clearly believes in the existence of God, although he would reject that God is beneficent in the sense that he acts for the sake of what is good. On Spinoza's view, God does not act for the sake of goods external to himself. If (b) is to mean that God can do anything he wants, Spinoza would object to it, but if it can be interpreted so as to mean that God can, and indeed must, do anything which follows from his infinitely powerful nature, then Spinoza clearly endorses (b) as well. In Chapter 1 it became evident, however, that Spinoza does not believe in (c), for he denies that there “is” any evil over and above human ways of imagining things according to subjective standards of moral perfection. Evil, like the good, is a universal. On Spinoza’s view, there is therefore no real property which our concept of evil picks out. Instead, evil is reduced to the status of a mere “mode of imagining” (1app). However, any idea of evil is nonetheless real insofar as it is (somehow) causally efficacious (see 1p36).

Given that (c) - the statement that there is evil, and the possibility that the existence of evil poses problems for the existence of God -, has gained momentum on the contemporary philosophical scene, this investigation of Spinoza is of particular relevance.

Whether a contemporary philosopher is formulating a deductive or an evidential argument against the existence of God from the existence of evil, the argument is predicated on the existence of evil as such, and this premise is not called into question. (The former is an argument in deductive form that attempts to establish that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil. The

\(^{42}\) Indeed, Paul Ricoeur asserts that one doesn’t have the right to speak of a theodicy, absent a consistent response to these three propositions; an apologetic goal and a systematic method (1986, pp. 38-9).
latter argument - the evidential one - does not seek to demonstrate that their co-existence is provably impossible, but only the weaker claim that it is highly unlikely.) While there is awareness that throughout much of the history of Western philosophy, evil was metaphysically considered as privation, contemporary authors often see this position as trivializing the reality of evil. One example of this is Fred Alford’s dismissal of the position; by referring to one passage in one text by Aquinas’s hand, Alford (2005, 50) entirely dismisses Aquinas’s treatment of evil as equally or more trivializing than he takes Augustine’s position to be. In his own words:

Augustine appears content with this answer, reflecting no further, even as he seems to sense that his answer is inadequate, that he has crossed a threshold of moral possibility (the love of destruction for its own sake) but is unable to go further. Aquinas does not go half as far.  

However, Alford’s analysis of the privation theory of evil is inadequate in that it assumes that once evil is metaphysically seen as privation, evil in moral matters

43 The context of Alford’s assessment of these Catholic philosophers is his dismissal of Hanna Arendt’s shift on the topic of evil. While she, in the On the Origins of Totalitarianism endorsed radical evil, her subsequent assessment of evil as “banal” (in her writings on the trial of Eichmann) seems to abandon that stance. Alford is critical of this move, which he considers as a retreat to a purported trivialization of evil. Thus, on Alford’s view, the least trivializing take on evil is to picture it as done for the sake of evil. But we rarely find that evil is perpetrated for its own sake. The Germans who implemented Nazism usually had an agenda other than that of being evil. Primo Levi’s notes from his time in a Nazi concentration camp contain many penetrating insights about human nature. In the Appendix to these notes, he wrote that although “monsters [by which he means exactly people carrying out evil for the sake of evil] exist, they are too few to be truly dangerous; most dangerous are the common men, functionaries ready to believe and obey without discussion” (Levi 2005, p. 176). Judging by Levi’s notes, it appears that rather than doing the evil for its own sake, it is the disinterested and coldly calculating attitude of the Germans toward their fellow human beings that made them allies of evil (e.g. 2005, p. 95).

We usually do not perpetrate the evil for the sake of being evil, and part of what is so horrific with evil is how it can be realized by human beings, including Nazis, intending the good. Evil for the sake of evil - evil conceptualized in the way which Alford judges most “deep” - is only to be found in acts of pure sadism (subtracting from the hedonic good of pleasure involved in sadism) that is widely portrayed by Hollywood villains.

I do not know why, in contemporary ethics, philosophers focus so much on gratuitous torture committed by pure sadism and so little on how people such as Nazis or political or religious terrorists, none of whom consider themselves evil, are able to carry out evils for the sake of what is, from their perverted perspectives, good. Perhaps it is because we too conceive ourselves as acting for the sake of the good, and we do not want to admit this commonality with evildoers - for then the apparent good for which we act may prove to be a perverted one, and our acts as a consequence evil.
cannot be “something positive”. This is, from the view of the history of philosophy, a gross over-simplification.\textsuperscript{44} Likewise, in his introduction to \textit{The Evidential Argument from Evil}, Daniel Howard-Snyder dismisses off-hand a privative account of metaphysical evil as an “exceedingly unreasonable” position - apparently assuming that a privative account of metaphysical evil automatically leads to a trivialization of the moral evil we witness in the world.\textsuperscript{45}

Yet Aquinas’s philosophy of evil aims exactly at the combination of a robust or positive account of evil in moral matters with a metaphysical privation theory of evil.\textsuperscript{46} While Aquinas held that evil metaphysically speaking was a privation he still sought to construe a robust theory of moral evil. What is potentially worrisome in this theory is therefore not that Aquinas defines evil with privation \textit{tout court}. The worry that faces Aquinas’s account is instead how one is to explain the relation between metaphysical and moral evil. To explain how metaphysical evil as privation grounds moral evil without recourse to religious devices such as the story of the fall is a challenging task. In this chapter I will not be concerned with defending systematically the grounding relation of moral evil in metaphysical evil on the part of Aquinas, although defenders of his view are probably in need of a solid account of this relation.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} Kent insightfully comments that one reason why we easily consider medieval writers as trivializing evil is because we tend to emphasize different kinds of evil. While contemporary discourse on evil is focalizing almost singularly on the evil the innocent suffer at the hands of the cruel, medieval authors were more interested in the infernal evil that each person can inflict on herself by sinning. As Kent (2007, p. 279) writes: “The damage we do to others in torturing or killing them pales by comparison with the evil we do to our own souls.”

\textsuperscript{45} “Of course, anyone modestly acquainted with medieval philosophy will tell you that the proposition that evil exists is not an essential part of theism. Perhaps Mackie just meant to voice his conviction that it is exceedingly unreasonable for a theist to deny that evil exists, which seems quite right” (Howard-Snyder 1996, p. xix).

\textsuperscript{46} See, for instance, Reichberg (2002).

\textsuperscript{47} Since modern formal ontologists in general reject the position that being is convertible only with the good, some have construed \textit{being} as convertible with the disjunction \textit{good, evil or indifferent} rather than only with \textit{good}, for example Woleński (2007, p. 372). While taking the disjunction of values as transcendental in the sense of collectively exhaustive of being has the benefit of being more readily formalizable than the original claim of the convertibility of being and good, this step also emptied the doctrine of the transcendental good of its theological meaning and normative force. It should be recalled that the Scholastic justification of why all and only being is good dates back to the theist notion of
In this chapter my aim is instead to present contemporary commentators who equate the metaphysical conception of evil as privation with a trivialization of evil in moral matters with the perhaps unique historical philosophy in which these positions do in fact coalesce — where evil is regarded as privation (or, to be exact, as negation) and this metaphysical position is the basis for an error theory of evil in moral matters. This notable exception to the philosophical mainstream of the West — in which evil in moral matters was seriously pondered, at the same time as a metaphysical understanding of evil as privation was maintained — occurs in Spinoza’s philosophy. Spinoza’s philosophy can at least in theory provide contemporary defenders of evil with the material their own thinking (antagonistically) needs. Expounding Spinoza’s position on evil is the same as supplying contemporary polemics with a historically adequate target. By juxtaposing Spinoza’s account with that of Aquinas, I will show how Spinoza’s metaphysics of evil, unlike Aquinas’s, does indeed explain away the phenomenon we call evil.

2.2. Aquinas and Spinoza.

2.2.1. Aquinas and Spinoza on the metaphysics of evil.

The question to be explored is whether Spinoza’s joint move of retaining perfection as a transcendental while rejecting the good, has significant consequences for his ethical thinking. In order to begin formulating an answer to this question, I will compare Spinoza’s negation theory of evil with a traditional account of evil as privation, aiming to establish wherein the ethically significant differences between these theories consist. More precisely, I will contrast Spinoza’s view with the one Thomas Aquinas puts forth in his disputed questions *De Malo*. While thoughts on the topic of evil and providence pervade Aquinas’s writings (reflection on these topics are to be found in, for example, ST, SCG, as well as in his commentaries on Job and the Pauline epistles) I choose this text because of its thematic simplicity and the clarity of its exposition. In this chapter I will therefore not expound the development of Aquinas’s thinking on evil, nor

---

creation, i.e. to the notion that all things “flow” from the first good and for this very reason are good insofar as they are. This is plausible only *given* the premise of a first good.
provide a systematic interpretation based on the entirety of his works. The goal is instead to, by means of a comparison, highlight what is peculiar about Spinoza’s privative (or more accurately, negative) theory of being.

According to Aquinas, God is the cause of all and only being, and since being and good are convertible, of all and only good. This raises the difficulty of how evil comes to be, as it is ontologically impossible for it to have being. At the outset of *De Malo*, Aquinas sets out to demonstrate that evil *does not* come to be, and that it is this falling short of being that we label as evil: “evil is indeed in things, although as a privation and not as an entity” (*De Malo*, q. 1, art. 1, ad. 20 [2001, p. 69]). However, something may be a privation of good in two respects: it may be evil *simpliciter*, as when something is “deprived of a particular good that is required [*ex debito*] for its perfection”, or evil *secundum quid*, as when a thing is “deprived of something that is required for the perfection of something else, but not for its own perfection” (*De Malo*, q. 1, art. 1, ad. 1, [2001 p. 63]). The former privation could be called intrinsic, since it deprives something of that which is due to its perfection, the latter extrinsic or relational, since it is a privation we ascribe to something when we consider what would be due to its perfection, were it something else. The examples Aquinas supplies of evil are sickness in an animal - being deprivation of the health that is required for the perfection of normal functioning -, and fire being deprived of “the form of water”. The following examples would be equally illustrative: a man deprived of sight and a stone deprived of sight (*De Malo*, 1. art. 3. q. 13 [2001, p. 83]).

Interestingly, this is also the example Spinoza supplies when elucidating the concept of privation for his correspondent Blijenbergh (in Letter 21). Spinoza’s correspondence with Blijenbergh (from winter, 1664, to spring, 1665) is noteworthy, since it is the only extant set of texts in which Spinoza extensively discusses the nature of evil. Blijenbergh first launches the correspondence in December 1664 (Letter 18), having read Spinoza’s *Treatise on Descartes’s Principles* (henceforward PPC) as well as its appendix, the CM. As the intellectual exchange between the two strangers unfolds, Spinoza grows more and more frustrated with Blijenbergh and in the end, terminates the correspondence.
Blijenbergh is commonly, and unjustly, depicted as a near-idiot in the literature.\textsuperscript{48} As Gilles Deleuze has pointed out in his essay on the topic, however, “[although Blijenbergh] does not know the Ethics, […] he raises one question after another, questions that go to the heart of Spinozism; he forces Spinoza […] to isolate a very strange conception of evil” (1988, pp. 30-1). Moreover, Blijenbergh does not oppose this “strange conception of evil” on exclusively dogmatic grounds: on the contrary, some of his ideas are philosophically interesting in their own right.\textsuperscript{49}

At the outset of their correspondence, as Blijenbergh inquires into the status of evil, Spinoza’s response is artfully traditional: he states that evil is “nothing positive” (echoing Aquinas’ position that evil is not something [aliquid] in q. 1. art. 1). Spinoza also restates the Thomist distinction between what is evil “absolutely” and what is evil “according to something else”, calling the former a privation and the latter a negation: “So Privation is nothing but denying something of a thing which we judge to pertain to its Nature and Negation nothing but denying something of a thing because it does not pertain to its nature” (Letter 21, C. p 378).

However, whereas Aquinas believes that this distinction between different kinds of lacks captures a way in which they are really different, Spinoza does not share this belief. Instead, without denying that the distinction plays an important role in the psychology of human beings, he significantly disposes of it in his metaphysics. This point is conveyed by how Spinoza construes the difference between a man deprived of sight and a stone deprived of sight. We say of the man that he is:

\textsuperscript{48} A case in point is Curley, who, empathizing with Spinoza, writes “Blijenbergh is a tedious fellow, obscure, repetitious and slow to see the point” (C. 349).
\textsuperscript{49} The very first question Blijenbergh raises, whether God is not ultimately responsible for inclining the will to good and evil alike, is one example of his originality. In raising this question Blijenbergh shows his dissatisfaction with the traditional construal of evil as non-being, and also disputes that God can be coherently thought of as causing the act, but not the act’s being evil (Letter 18, C. 356). Both of these positions, to which Spinoza subscribes, are more representative of the late Scholastic tradition at large than Blijenbergh’s views. In fact, Blijenbergh seems to here anticipate some of the points in Leibniz’s text “The Author of Sin”; “Car de dire que Dieu n’est pas l’auteur du peché, par ce qu’il n’est pas auteur d’une privation : quoiqu’il puisse estre appelé auteur de tout ce qu’il y a de reel et de positif dans le peché, c’est une illusion manifeste” (2006, p. 110).
deprived of sight, because we easily imagine him as seeing, whether this imagination arises from the fact that we compare him with others who see, or his present state with his past, when he used to see. And when we consider this man in this way, by comparing his nature with that of others or with his own past nature, then we affirm that seeing pertains to his nature, and for that reason we say that he is deprived of it. But when we consider God’s decree, and his nature, we can no more affirm of that man than of a Stone, that he is deprived of vision. For at that time vision no more pertains to that man without contradiction than it does to the stone, *since nothing more pertains to that man, and is his, than what the Divine intellect and will attribute to him.* (Letter 21, C. 377).

The privation we usually care about, and label as evil, is of course not privation of just any perfection, but what Aquinas calls “privation of a required perfection” (*privatio debite perfectionis*) (Aquinas, 2001: q. 1. art. 2 resp. [2001, pp. 75-6]). In Letter 21, Spinoza, in contrast, poignantly denies that we can make adequate judgments of which negations qualify as privations of a due perfection. For, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as privation of the reality that is due to a thing. For nothing more, Spinoza stresses, is due to anything than what necessarily follows from God’s nature, and as a consequence, is. For Spinoza, there is no ontological difference whereby privations of due goods and mere negations differ. We just label something as a privation of a due perfection when our expectations of how things ought to be are sufficiently offended. Of course, we may not explicitly label evils as privations of due goods. That we consider evils as privations is nonetheless implied by our sense of indignation and outrage at something’s being deprived of a good which was its due share.

Let us compare this with Aquinas’s application of the example of the blind stone. Since sight is not due to the perfection of a stone, “no evil results” from the stone’s lack of sight (*De Malo* q. 1. art. 3. q. 13 [2001, p. 83]). In the same way, when Spinoza states that for the blind man, since sight is not part and parcel of his perfection now, the man’s condition isn’t properly called evil, although there is a negation of sight in the man. By the same principle no accident of nature, no monstrosity, no disaster, could properly speaking qualify as evil. Spinoza allows that we suffer from circumstances we would label as evils but denies that they can be labelled as such absolutely.
Aquinas holds that only being is and is good, and since lacks of being have no causal power, the good must cause the lack of being that is evil. The good cannot cause the evil by somehow aiming at it, since only the good is desirable and can function as end in a causal process. (Aquinas’s Aristotelian theory of final causality is extensive and encompasses also things to which we would ascribe no intentionality.) Instead, good things either cause the evil by accident or else evil results from a deficient good. When evil occurs naturally - to use Aquinas’ example, when deficient semen causes a monster, the deficiency in the good can always ultimately be traced back to a perfection, for example a mutation in the semen that is a positive reality (De Malo, q. 1. art. 3. resp. [2001 p. 87]). The consumption of the child by the wolf is aiming at what is good for the wolf (nourishment) but accidentally causes the death of the child, and so on. Thus, natural evils are always ultimately produced when something good accidentally causes evil.

Although Spinoza does not, as I explained in the previous chapter, consider being and good coextensive, he agrees with Aquinas that only being is, and that since negations have no causal power, what is must cause whatever reality there is in the phenomena we call evil. This is clear from Spinoza’s casual remark that that “through which things are said to be determined to produce an effect must be something positive [quid positivum] (as is known through itself)” (1p26d). However, even though the causal interactions of beings eventually lead to negations (the negation of the life of the child as it is consumed by the wolf), none of these negations can, properly speaking, be called privations of goods that are due to the thing in question.

Aquinas’s distinction between what is evil simpliciter (which corresponds to what Spinoza calls a privation) and what is evil secundum quid (corresponding to what Spinoza calls a negation) relies on an optimism vis-à-vis the epistemic value of the teleological judgment which Spinoza does not share. In other words, the distinction relies on the premise that humans have the capacity to distinguish what, apart from perfection itself - i.e., the raw being it necessarily has - is due to an individual. Since, however, all concepts of any perfections that are not
convertible with being are inadequate, we have no such capacity. Here Spinoza’s distinction between ontological and teleological (and thus merely subjective) perfection comes into play.

It should be recalled that evil, considered as a non-being, is a universal. But it is a kind of non-being different from that of a chimaera (such as the square circle). While the latter is a merely verbal being of no consequence to us, the former shoulders an important role in our day-to-day reasoning. For evil functions as a relative concept by the means of which we explain to what extent human behavior lives up to the universal of subjective perfection. Evil is a being of reason that consists of two inseparable steps: we judge something’s status as good or evil by comparing it to a standard. Spinoza construes evil as an explanatory concept which is adduced in the absence of proper understanding. For neither the good nor the evil which we predicate of x, nor the teleological standard against which we ordinarily hold x, have being as such. More exactly, while there is some physical process which corresponds to the formation of the notion in our minds, there is nothing in reality that these concepts pick out.

In sum, by calling evil a being of reason, Spinoza implies that it is a comparative concept that captures the superficial aspects of human existence but fails to capture anything at all about what really is, and what is thus ontologically perfect insofar as it is. For, as Spinoza puts it in rather traditional terms in Letter 21, “[w]e cannot [impute evil to the man overcome by sensual appetite] if we attend to the nature of the Divine decree and intellect, for in that regard the better appetite no more pertains to that man’s nature at that time than it does to the Nature of the Devil, or a stone” (C. 377-8). Privations of due goods are in the eyes of the human beholder, whereas in reality, there are only negations of perfections that were not due when they did not occur, since they were not then necessitated by God’s nature. Properly speaking, only a privation of a due good would be a real evil, but no such evils exist. But like others beings of reason, the inadequate
notion of evil may still prove useful for the coordination of human society. Yet, when we ascribe reality to evil, as Blijenbergh insists on doing, we are committing what for Spinoza, as for Parmenides would be an intellectual sin, namely that of imagining a non-being to be a real being.

What does it mean that our ideas of (hypostasized) good and evil are inadequate? An image is a confused idea, an idea which is not formed by the activity of the intellect, but by the imagination’s being affected by external bodies (see 2p17s). Spinoza’s favorite example of an image is the distance of the sun, which he says appears to be around 200 feet above us. In 4p1s - the first proposition in the Part on Human Bondage - Spinoza emphasizes that we continue to imagine the sun to be 200 feet away, even after we come to know that our image of the sun’s distance does not correctly represent its real position. Since an adequate idea of the sun’s position in space will not change the way our body is affected by the body of the sun, an adequate idea will not free us from the image.

Just as we cannot rid ourselves of our image of the sun being 200 feet away by acquiring adequate knowledge of astronomy, so, I would like to submit, we may not be able to rid ourselves of the impression that one thing is intrinsically good and the other intrinsically evil. But just as we can know the sun’s true distance from the earth while nonetheless retaining the impression that it is much closer, we can also continue to use the words ‘good’ and ‘evil’, perfectly aware that they are always relative to a standard, and nonetheless continue to experience some phenomena as being evil as such. The analogy with the sun is not perfect; the sun will appear to be at a certain distance away from the earth because of the way our sensual apparatus is wired. Things will appear to be possessed of intrinsic qualities of good and evil not merely because of the way our senses are affected, but more specifically because we compare them to universal standards. While we

---

50 Spinoza holds that for the purpose of coordinating a society consisting mainly of irrational citizens, many concepts that philosophizing, when done in the right order, proves to lack ontological foundation, are nonetheless useful.
51 See Kirk et al. (1983, Fragments 291 and 293).
52 For a helpful discussion of this, see Lebuffe (2010, p. 60). Lebuffe emphasizes that the example (along with other passages) shows that, on Spinoza’s theory of knowledge, merely entertaining an image does not necessarily induce one in error.
may not be physically necessitated to do so, we are culturally conditioned to compare things and events to standards in a way that seems nearly as inevitable.

Spinoza himself employs words such as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ without postulating a metaphysical good or a metaphysical evil. In 4d1 and 4d2 Spinoza defines good and evil as what is useful and useless to us, construing the human individual as the most reliable standard. Yet all utility is also defined in relation to an end. In the context of human psychology, this end is called appetite: “By the end for the sake of which we do something is called appetite” (4d7), or desire. By being aware of the ontological status of good and evil, that is, linguistically put, by being aware of the fact that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are terms which are always relative to a certain standard, supplied by a given desire, we become less inclined to ascribe reality or perfection to ideas of what is good, or evil, as such.

But since we are continuously subject to the flow of images from which we abstract our teleological notions of perfection, it seems that on Spinoza’s view, we cannot help perceiving intrinsic good and evil in the world. Yet, merely entertaining the impression that something is evil as such does not in and of itself make us epistemically blameworthy, for we are only irrational to the extent that we act upon our images in the belief that they are true, not to the extent that we imagine. As Spinoza puts it in 4p1s: “[Images] are not contrary to the true, and they do not disappear in its presence”. Spinoza would acknowledge the appearance of evil. Nonetheless, he clearly devalues the ontological status of that evil. For it simply is not an objective property of things.

When we imagine non-beings to have being, we are imagining them without the corrective device of an adequate idea, supplied to us by the intellect, which enables us to entertain an image without believing it to adequately represent reality. (On my reading of Spinoza, the corrective idea that will enable us to move beyond good and evil is that of ontological perfection.) When we imagine the

---

53 Spinoza defines desire and appetite in 3p9s1 and 3DefAff2. I agree with Kisner (2011, p. 90) that “[g]iven these [passages], desires are best understood as the same thing as appetite, with the added qualification that desires are usually […] appetites of which we are conscious”.

50
positive existence of a negation (such as positive or radical evil), we thereby transform useful regulative concepts into fictions, non-beings we imagine to have being. This latter offence against ontology we perpetuate habitually, the reason being that “[images] arise from the ideas of real beings so immediately that they are quite easily confused with them by those who do not pay very close attention” (C. 301), or so Spinoza suggests.

2.2.2. Aquinas and Spinoza on moral evil and deep blame.

While Spinoza’s equation of nature with God may already induce one to accept that natural evils are wrongly called privations of due goods, since nothing can happen in nature that is not part of God’s infinitely complex self-causation, one may wonder what consequences this has for Spinoza’s moral theory, and the specific kind of evil that is brought about by humans. In what follows, I will illuminate the moral dimension of Spinoza’s theory of evil by comparing it to Aquinas’s theory of moral evil. This is of interest since, as we have seen, Aquinas too subscribed to a privative account of evil. However, Aquinas’s privative account of evil did not prevent him from construing moral evil as something positive. I will suggest that it is Spinoza’s rejection of an ontological grounding for the difference between negation and privation that leads him to pursue an account of moral evil that is radically different from that of Aquinas.

For Aquinas, the category of moral evil comprises sin in moral matters and moral wrong (malum culpae). This evil differs from natural evils and divine punishment in that, whereas these latter are ultimately caused by God, God does not cause moral evil (q. 1. art. 5. co. [2001, p. 113]). How then is moral evil to be explained, on Aquinas’ account?

The causation of moral evil conforms to the pattern in which, either, a deficient good causes evil or a good causes evil accidentally (i.e., willing the evil under an aspect of good), but differs in that the good that is specified as cause is the will (voluntas: q. 1. art. 3. co. [2001 p. 87]). Man is free since his will has the power “to acquiesce or not acquiesce” (recipere vel non recipere), that is, the will has the capacity to make a free choice (liberum arbitrium). According to Aquinas, the will
has this power for the reason that in practical deliberation, it is not determined to opt for any given choice.

Moral evil thus differs from natural evil (and divine punishment) insofar as it has the human will as a cause, and more precisely the human will in its capacity of disposing freely among choices. Strictly speaking, willing is not free, since, as Pasnau helpfully explains, “willing [...] is the desire for ultimate ends, and the ultimate end is necessitated” - it is blessedness or, as Pasnau (2002, p. 219) translates it, happiness (beatitude). But it is still the will's capacity to dispose freely among choices in rational deliberation that accounts for moral responsibility, and in this way, Aquinas can attribute moral wrong to individuals possessing this limited freedom - not a freedom for choosing our ends, as Pasnau points out, but a freedom for choosing the means to these ends. Therefore, the free choice of our will is the feature in virtue of which we can be held responsible: it is because moral evil resides in this free choice, that humans can be held accountable for their deeds, words and desires, in ways that we do not hold natural phenomena accountable. Whereas natural evils are mere privations, Aquinas therefore contends that moral evil is something positive (aliquote positive) (q. 2. a. 11. ad 13; see also q. 1. a. 1. ad 2), by which I take him something genuinely opposed to a good in which we could have chosen to acquiesce instead. The good which we should always choose to acquiesce in is the supreme good.54

But why, it may be asked, is the will deficient in the first place? Surely the deficiency of the will must have a cause, either natural - like the mutation that insofar as it was “perfect” (i.e., real) brought about a deficiency in the semen, or supernatural (if God directly would weaken one’s will). This raises the universal question that Galen Strawson has called the Basic Argument. Strawson provides many formulations of the argument, the most scholastically sounding, and here stylistically most fitting, being this one: “True self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice” (1994, p. 7). We make choices on the basis of principles we have, but if we wish to choose these principles, we must also choose the principles

---

54 This also explains why God cannot be the cause of moral wrong: he cannot turn away from the supreme good, which he is (q. 3. resp. [2011, p. 231]).
on the basis of which we choose the first-mentioned principles, and so on. But this is impossible. Since we can only be fully morally responsible for our choices if we have chosen the principles on the basis of which we make our choices, we are not fully morally responsible. Instead of being so chosen, the “principles” in question are, for example, the outcome of hereditary or cultural factors, result from events in early childhood, and so on. Aquinas dismisses this argument - indeed, in order to hold the deficient will accountable for its deficiency, he must dismiss it. Thus, he states that we need not, or should not, (non oportet) “look for another cause of this deficiency, and so we do not need to make an infinite regress” (q. 1. art 3. ad. 6. p. 89.).

But why does Aquinas believe this to be the case? To my mind, there are, at least in theory, two possible replies. While one shows more fidelity to the text, the other is equally interesting. For this reason, I will state both, and then discuss Spinoza’s position in the light of these responses.

It seems to me that Aquinas contradicts himself when he states that (a) “in voluntary things, the cause of the evil is that sin is deficient will, and that deficiency, as conceived prior to sin, does not have the aspect either of moral wrong or of punishment” (q. 1. art. 3. ad. 6, p. 89), although he subsequently in ad. 12 states that (b): “The very deficiency of the will consists of moral wrong, just as the deficiency of the intellect consists of ignorance […] Therefore, the deficiency of the will does not excuse one from wrongdoing, just as the deficiency of the intellect does not prevent ignorance” (p. 91). While both are replies to the objections following after the answer, and therefore should both represent Aquinas’ view, it is evident that only (a) correctly conveys Aquinas’ actual view.

The first citation (a) supports the reading that is most consistent with the overall response in q. 1. art. 3, namely that there is a prior disposition of the will which explains the actuality of sin but which is not as such blameworthy. Such a view raises the question why we are not blameworthy for our dispositions, but only for our choices. Perhaps, it is possible for us not to be blameworthy for being disposed in certain ways if dispositions alone do not determine the way our will is inclined: if, to speak in Strawson’s terms, the “principles” of our choices (desires
and so on) do not wholly determine our choices. This seems to be Aquinas’s view.  

Differently put, if our prior disposition (principles, desires and so on, which we did not choose in the first place) do not wholly determine our choices, then we can be held responsible for choices without being responsible for “principles of choices”. And, as we have seen, Aquinas denies that the will is wholly determined by its prior dispositions: “For granted that emotions fetter reason, an evil choice necessarily results, but the will retains the power to resist the fettering of reason” (emphasis added) (q. 3, p. 291).

The will retains a principal freedom in the face of desires and the value judgments these express, since the will is not even determined to choose what we judge to be good. Just as the intellect is not “compelled to assent to conclusions” of arguments if it does not perceive the truth of the premises, so the will is not “necessarily moved to anything that does not even seem to have a necessary connection with happiness [beatitudine] which is naturally willed”. Moreover, even in the case of what has a necessary connection with happiness (God), “this necessary connection is not fully evident to humans in this life” (q. 3 art. 3. resp. pp. 235-7). The will is not necessarily moved towards lesser goods than God, nor even, in this life, towards God, and so it retains the capacity to resist the desire of any good. Even though desires and dispositional features of our characters may, and do, incline the will, we are not wholly under their sway, simply because our powers of rational evaluation are deficient. If, by contrast, we could always infallibly discern the relation of various goods to the ultimate good of blessedness, we would in most cases not enjoy any freedom of choice.  

The other citation (b) appears to object to the view that a deficient will excuses an agent. Aquinas’s response to the opinion that the deficiency of the will can excuse the sinner, is here that just as the deficiency of the intellect consists in ignorance,

---

55 As many critics of indeterminism have pointed out, if our principles of choice do not determine our choice, it seems that this undermines the notion of moral responsibility that the indeterminist device was meant to safeguard. For a response to the determinist objection, see Foot (1957, pp. 62-73). I will not enter this debate here.

56 This raises the problem of how someone perfectly rational - God - could even principally choose between two equal goods. I am unsure of how Aquinas would respond.
so does the deficiency of the will consist in the evil of moral wrong (q. 1, art. 2, ad. 12, p. 91). Deficient will is, thus construed, moral wrong itself, and already blamable as such, regardless of what determined it to be thus. Read this way, Aquinas’s position would echo a tragic insight which has been brought to bear on contemporary ethics in the works of philosophers like Martha Nussbaum.\(^{57}\) Literary works, especially Greek tragedy, seem to suggest that the categories of blame and guilt are not always coextensive, and that human beings, by accident alone, may find themselves blameable without being guilty for bringing about their situation.\(^{58}\) Such an understanding of blameworthiness denies that it is necessary for one to be strictly responsible for one’s actions in order for blame to accrue to them. Basing one’s reading on (b) alone (i.e. q. 1. art. 3. ad. 12), Aquinas’ position that moral wrong consists in a deficient will would likewise allow external factors to determine our will to be deficient, while maintaining that the agent is nonetheless blameworthy for having been determined to will in this way. However, as already stated, Aquinas maintains that in practical deliberation, one is not determined to choose a certain good, for the reason that no good appears necessarily connected with blessedness to humans in this life. Therefore, the will cannot be wholly determined to any choice.

In any case, Aquinas safeguards morality by making the will the locus of praise and blame. In the first (and genuinely Thomist) scenario, the will is the locus of praise and blame since the will is free to choose among the reasons that will ultimately incline it. In the second, and less Thomist, tragic scenario, the will is the locus of praise and blame even if it has been caused to be inclined in a certain way by factors beyond its control. Generally, the locus of praise and blame will naturally also be the locus of ethical perfection, and so philosophers who consider

\(^{57}\) Thomas Nagel (1979) makes a similar point, for he suggests that the problem of how to reconcile the apparent fact that we can be more or less blameworthy for contingent factors with a solid concept of moral responsibility “has no solution”. See also Nagel (2003, p. 184). This comes close of admitting a tragic insight.

\(^{58}\) The paradigmatic example is Agamemnon who is blameworthy for sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia, although he is compelled to do so by external forces. See Chapter 1 in Nussbaum (2001). This ambiguity in tragedy in general is widely acknowledged. For the case of Aeschylus, see for instance Lesky (1983, p. 21): “[W]e have seen what an important part in Aeschylus’ dramas the ambiguity of human action plays. It can be the fulfillment of a duty, obedience to a divine order; and yet at the same time be a dreadful crime”.
the will as that locus will present perfection of the will as the chief locus of moral perfection in the human being.

It is interesting that, on the first Thomist model (a), the source of our freedom of choice and our evil actions have the same root: both stem from our incapacity to infallibly recognize what is good for us. It is this incapacity that makes room for some indeterminacy in which the will can exercise its freedom of choice. By contrast, Spinoza would deny that we can become ethically perfect by choosing freely among alternative options that incline our will differently. Such a strategy is impossible given his account of human psychology.

Significantly, Spinoza does not believe that the will has freedom of choice. The error of finality which, on his view, has poisoned theology and natural science alike, stems from our belief in a fictitious free will (1app). We always ask after the final cause or purpose behind someone’s act. We say that Orestes killed Clytamnestra because he wanted to avenge his father. We are content with this answer and do not probe further into the endless series of causes behind this choice, but that contentedness only indicates our intellectual sloth, not that the (alleged) purpose of the act was really its ultimate cause.

The reason why we cannot even in principle arrive at a free will as we list the causes behind an act, is that for Spinoza there simply is no such (rational and appetitive) faculty as the one Aquinas calls the will. Interestingly, in the Ethics, there is strictly speaking no will at all, neither divine nor human. The will is to the set of disparate volitions what the concept of human being is to all the members of the human species, namely a generalization, a mere universal (see 2p48 for this point).

Moreover, in 2p49d, Spinoza sets out to demonstrate that any volition of ours - that is, any affirmation or negation - takes place already at the level of intellectual judgment, or as he puts it, at the level of ideas. In Spinoza’s words, there is in the mind “no volition […] except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea” (2p49). A volition is here understood as an affirmation or a negation, whereas an idea, according to Spinoza’s theory, is the mind’s active intention of the ideatum. Spinoza’s point is that the mental act which we call an idea always contains its
own affirmation or negation - there is no further volitional element superadded to it. One corollary of this is that “the singular volitions and ideas are one and the same” (2p49c).

There is thus no room for indeterminacy that can assert itself between the reasons that incline the will, on the one hand, and the will itself, on the other. *All of the reasons that incline the will are already themselves acts of will.* These volitions are modes and as such causally determined (see 1p32d for the claim that all modes are determined). Therefore, the will - in the sense of the faculty that executes a free choice among reasons - cannot, insofar as it is ultimately undetermined, be the locus of perfection advocated by Spinoza. Hence Spinoza rejects (a), the argument that dispositions are not blamable since they do not determine the will.

Does Spinoza, then, accept the tragic possibility we extracted from q. 1, art. 2, ad. 12 (but which Aquinas himself does not entertain), namely that (b) we may be held morally responsible (in the sense of being blame- or praiseworthy) even for an inclination of the will that stems from factors over which we wield no conscious control? That is, is there a kind of blame that accrues to God or to ourselves even if the will is determined or even necessitated? It must be noted that this would be a different kind of blame from the one Spinoza criticizes in 1app, where he only targets the notion of blame that presupposes freedom of will. Tragic blame, by contrast, is compatible both with freedom and its absence. For tragic blame occurs when someone is blameworthy in spite of the fact that he or she could not have done otherwise.

In Letters 75 and 78, Spinoza assesses the issue whether morality is compromised by his view that all things are necessary. Spinoza states that the “inevitable necessity” he builds on “does not destroy either divine or human laws” (Letter 75, C. p. 471), that is, he asserts that his system preserves whatever notion of moral responsibility is necessary for us to (want to continue to) abide by these laws. Whether or not Spinoza’s system is in fact necessitarian is an issue I cannot undertake to discuss here. Curley and Walski have claimed that the *moral*

---

59 Whether Oldenburg is right or not, it is clear that he, at least, ascribes necessitarianism to Spinoza’s philosophy. I believe that Oldenburg is right in this. Let me briefly explain
consequences that worry Oldenburg follow from determinism alone. They are right in this, at least on the incompatibilist assumption that moral responsibility requires counterfactual freedom (i.e., the freedom to act otherwise than one in facts acts). For if one grants this assumption, then even determinism must break the back of morality. Spinoza provides us with two responses to this worry. (In subsequent chapters, I will advance the bolder thesis that, for Spinoza, necessitarianism is not only compatible with human perfection: it is the fundament of human perfection.)

First, that blessedness or wretchedness follow inevitably does not make the good of blessedness less desirable or the evil of wretchedness more terrifying (Letter 75, C. II. 471). That is, he disputes that the fact that someone sins inevitably renders the sin less appalling. This is an answer to those who may think that basic moral attitudes of approval and disapproval may be destroyed by determinism (or, for that matter, necessitarianism).

Second, that we are determined to do good or bad does not mean that punishment and reward are useless. Spinoza adduces rabies as a case in point: “Someone who is crazy because of a dog’s bite is indeed to be excused; nevertheless, he is rightly suffocated” (Letter 78, C. II. 480). Punishment and wretchedness are appropriate in two different ways. First, punishment and reward are appropriately distributed by society; the wicked are thereby contained, controlled or destroyed, and the good promoted. Second, blessedness and wretchedness are appropriately

why. In their modal thinking, early modern philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibniz rely upon the theological device of creation. More specifically, if God could have created the world in any other way than he does indeed create it, there is another possible world. Otherwise, there is no such world, and the actual world is the only possible one. There is abundant evidence that Spinoza throughout his philosophical career held that God could not “create” the “world” in any other way than he actually creates “it” - or, in terms that are faithful to Spinoza’s mature viewpoint, that he could not cause himself in any other way than he does actually cause himself. Don Garrett (1991, p. 195) helpfully lists all passages in the first part of the Ethics where Spinoza states that “all things - clearly including finite modes - must follow from the necessity of the divine nature”. These passages are: 1p16; 1p17; 1p26d; 1p33d and 1p33s. For an earlier letter pointing in the same direction, see Letter 54 to Hugo Boxel (1654). However, the exact nature of Spinoza’s modal thinking remains a widely debated issue. For a refutation of two arguments for contingency in Spinozism, see Chapter 4.

60 Curley and Walski (1999). However, I do not agree with their conclusions in this paper for reasons to be stated in Chapter 4.
distributed by Nature or God, since blessedness is the natural consequence of virtue - indeed is “virtue itself” (Spinoza, 1982), and wretchedness the natural consequence of sinfulness, and like all causal connections in nature they too are necessary. This Spinoza intends as an answer to those who may suppose that if determinism (or necessitarianism) is true, we might as well give up on our practises of punishment and reward. On the contrary, he maintains, these (determined) practices have positive effects in society.

One has reason to suppose that Oldenburg’s deepest worry is not hereby allayed. For these remarks only show that reward and punishment are appropriate, and as Charles Manekin (2014) has remarked before me, they need not, for that reason, also be adequate or deserved. Manekin uses the case of pets as an example: within a paternalistic model of divine justice, men may, like pets, be punished even if they cannot properly be held morally responsible.\(^{61}\)

Stating, as Spinoza does, that we can endorse whatever notion of responsibility is required for us to maintain our legal and social systems of punishment and blame, rewards and praise, fails to capture the deeper notion of responsibility which characterizes intersubjective human relations. There is a difference between assenting to the punishment and containment of a criminal and genuinely holding him blameworthy for what he has done.\(^{62}\) We have already seen that Spinoza does not think that his denials of freedom of will and freedom of choice preclude us from regulating society in accordance with traditional laws. Be that as it may, One may still wonder what Spinoza’s denial of freedom means for the deeper notion of moral responsibility, the one that we only credit people with when we regard them as persons? Can such a deep notion of blame accrue to human beings or to God, on Spinoza’s view, or is this notion, as Oldenburg maintains, destroyed by his denial of freedom?

In Letter 75, Spinoza is (as he subsequently explains in Letter 78) concerned with exculpating God. God cannot be blamed for having made men worse than he

\(^{61}\) Manekin (2014) discusses this problem in the context of the determinist tradition in medieval Jewish philosophy.

\(^{62}\) Strawson (1982) has drawn attention to exactly this difference, which he calls the difference between “objective” and “participant” attitudes.
could have, for he could not have made them otherwise, acting from the necessity of his nature. Hence, the reason why we cannot blame God for having made us worse than he could have is simply that he actually could not have made us better. This is a theodicy that proceeds from necessitarianism. Necessitarianism suffices to show the impossibility of imputing some kind of moral imperfection to God. But if humans are necessitated to the same extent as God, then what about them? Are we then not also ultimately without fault? If God is to be considered blameless since he could not have done otherwise, should we also not be considered blameless in doing what we cannot but do?

In the same letter, Spinoza addresses this question. Here, he states that “the only reason men are inexcusable before God is that they are in his power as clay is in the power of the potter, who, of the same mass, makes some vessels for honor, and others for dishonor” (C. II. 471, cf. Romans 9:18-24). Spinoza, with characteristic heartlessness, appeals to the same trope that Omar Khayyam uses to dismantle divine justice in *Rubaiyat*, but with the opposite end in view (unless he is being ironic). Oldenberg’s indignation at this matches Khayyam’s in intensity if not in eloquence, for he holds that, if Spinoza’s model is correct, “men are for that reason completely excusable because they are in God’s power” (Letter 77, C. II. 479).\(^{63}\) In response to this, Spinoza significantly *concedes Oldenberg’s point*, namely that men can be held excusable since they are necessitated to do what they do, but again opposes Oldenberg’s claim that this excusability poses any threat to divine or human laws.

Thus, it seems, that if blame, in the adequate or deep sense, is one of virtue’s sinews (as Oldenburg maintains) Spinoza does indeed cut it. The reason why we can neither blame God nor humans is interestingly rooted in necessitarianism. This point is very important. From the fact that God *could* not have been any different, it follows that we simply cannot consistently demand that he or his modes *should* be different in any way.

---

\(^{63}\)Cf. *Rubaiyat*: “What! from his helpless Creature be repaid
Pure Gold for what he lent us dross-allay’d;
Sue for a Debt we never did contract,
And cannot answer? — Oh, the sorry trade!” (Fitz Gerald’s translation, 1905).
God is, on Spinoza’s view, exculpated, since he acts from necessity alone. Humans *rightly* (i) suffer the consequences of this necessity, whether they are vessels made for honor or dishonor. In other words, humans are “inexcusable before God” (Letter 75) - a statement Spinoza glosses as the claim that “no one can reproach God because he has given him a weak nature or a mind lacking in power” (Letter 78, C. II. 480). Yet humans are to be held accountable before each other for the evil they commit, in the sense that we *rightly* (ii) abhor the bad and and esteem the good. For example, Nero is to be blamed for being “ungrateful, without compassion and disobedient”, while Orestes is not, or at least less, blameworthy for committing the same crime (Letter 23 to Blijenbergh, C. 388).64

I have emphasized the word *rightly* above, because it is here being used in two different senses. In the first case, it is right that humans should suffer the consequences of God’s infinite perfection, since God’s nature is necessarily like that. I phrase it in this way to emphasize that there is an axiological dimension to God’s ontological perfection. On my reading, Spinoza’s reasoning is as follows: It is objectively right that only what necessarily happens ever happens since only that is, in its own way, an expression of infinite ontological perfection. Only when under the sway of human, all too human, ways of judging things do we object to nature by comparing it with our categories of subjective perfection or imperfection. Only then do we think that we are in position to blame God for what is telologically imperfect.

But by which standard do we then *rightly* abhor the bad and esteem the good (ii)? *By the very subjective standard which Spinoza thinks is inapplicable to the deep-structure of reality.* Even though such appraisals are useful and indeed indispensable for the regulation of society, these judgments can, since they operate with beings of reasons, never truly capture reality.

It turns out, that in the end Spinoza rejects (b) as well. That is, he rejects the view that the will can be blameworthy for willing poorly, even if it is determined to do

---

64 It is significant that, for Spinoza, the act of matricide, insofar as it is activity and expresses reality, consists only in perfection; the blame that accrues to Nero does so because of the negation of “gratefulness, compassion and disobedience” that he exhibits in committing the act. Likewise, Aquinas holds that “acts of sin come from God, but that sin does not” (q. 3. art. 2. resp. p. 239).
so. More precisely, if the blameworthiness that is to accrue to us for our evil
dispositions, regardless of how those first arose, is to be meant in a deep sense,
then we are not to be blamed for these dispositions. We are only prudentially to
hold ourselves and others accountable for them, in order to control what is
relatively bad for ourselves and for society.

This is clearly an error theory of evil. The ethical implications of this view are far
more extreme than those of the privation theory of metaphysical evil, which in
recent accounts has been accused of being insufficient in the face of modern evils.
For according to Spinoza’s theory of evil, evil is not even a privation, it is, as it
were, less. Evil is a mere negation that the human mind distorts into a privation,
by using the comparative devices of beings of reasons. Next, I will suggest that
for Spinoza, someone cannot make progress on her way to perfection, unless she
can disentangle herself from this habitual confusion where the perhaps indelible
image of evil is taken as a gauge for the existence of evil.

2.3. Ethical significance.

2.3.1. The locus of human perfection in Spinoza’s thought.

In general, the locus of praise and blame will also be the locus of ethical
perfection. If one is praised or blamed for willing well or poorly, then one should
perfect one’s will. Certainly, this does not seamlessly apply to Aquinas’ view, for
whom “ignorance can be a voluntary sin” (2001, q. 3, art. 7, ad. 9, p. 273). But for
Aquinas, some praise and blame (in the deep sense) certainly befall us on account
of our choices. In contrast, since Spinoza denies that we are possessed of anything
along the lines of a free choice, he also denies that any praise or blame, in the
deep sense, can accrue to us on account of the choices we make. As we have seen,
Spinoza does not take this to mean that we should give up on our social praxes of
praise and blame. We should go on punishing and praising people on solely
consequentialist grounds, without believing that there is an objective property
such as evil in the subject we prudentially judge to merit punishment. Presumably,
such a cold attitude becomes easier to adopt when we realize that the halo of evil,
which we naturally see surrounding people like terrorists or imperialist invaders,
fails to do justice to the particulars in question.
Nonetheless, Spinoza is very preoccupied with ethics, as the title of his chef d’oeuvre clearly indicates. Moreover, he is concerned with ethical perfection. But if his ideal of the greatest possible human perfection is to have any ontological foundation, it must be articulable independently of moral concepts such as what is good, evil, teleologically perfect or imperfect. Spinoza’s ideal of ethical perfection cannot be based on these concepts without itself lacking in ontological foundation.

The assumption that an ideal of human perfection must have an ontological foundation is not beyond questioning. Could human perfection not be something artful and genuinely false?\textsuperscript{65} Perhaps Spinoza could subscribe to a way of conceptualizing human perfection as ultimately subjectively construed, but as nonetheless worthy of pursuit. For Spinoza evidently holds that we can only efficiently organize society by co-opting beings of reason and beings of the imagination, concepts that fail to capture items or structures in reality, for instance concepts such as good and evil. Given this human dependence on judgments that are metaphysically groundless, but nonetheless of extreme consequence in our life, would it not be plausible that the perfection our psychological constitution allows us to pursue, is merely subjective and not at all ontologically grounded? Are we not creatures whose motivations are most often swayed by judgments of good and evil, and the teleologically perfect and imperfect?

However, as far as Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is concerned, the contrary is the case. In the following chapter, I will present in greater detail the reasons why human perfection, according to Spinoza, is to be measured by solid ontological standards. For present purposes, it is enough to bear in mind that for Spinoza, as for Aquinas, human perfection consists in blessedness. “If joy consists in the passage to a greater perfection, blessedness \emph{beatitude} must surely consist in the fact that \emph{the Mind is endowed with perfection itself}” (5p33s), Spinoza writes. The mind is endowed with this perfection through the third kind of knowledge (5p27d). No matter how such knowledge is to be understood exactly (for my interpretation, see Chapter 8), it is clear that, as a bare minimum, necessary but far from sufficient condition, it must qualify as knowledge. But

\textsuperscript{65}Giacomo Leopardi (1991), for instance, advocates such a view in “Storia del genere umano”.

63
what can qualify as knowledge? According to Spinoza, a knowing intellect should comprehend nothing but God’s attributes and his modes (see 1p30). Hypostasized evil - evil thought of as an objective property inherent in things - is not such a mode (or a mode of a mode), and so cannot be truly comprehended by an intellect. It can thus not possibly be an object for the kind of knowledge wherein our intellectual perfection consists.

In spite of the fact that cognition or intellecction are not always in contemporary philosophy considered as morally charged activities, they are nonetheless for Spinoza deeply ethical, in the sense that they are the activities anyone pursuing perfection ought to pursue. Since knowledge is for Spinoza the most “perfecting” activity humans can engage in, and since true knowledge is about what really is, such knowledge is to be distinguished from all explanations in terms of good and evil. Differently put, Spinoza’s cognitive ideal of human perfection is articulated beyond the horizon of good and evil.

The conclusion I am here drawing may appear to be too bold and not sufficiently supported by the relevant Spinozist texts. Yet, there is textual support that on Spinoza’s view, faith in assessments of good and evil (whether these assessments be of natural phenomena, of humans or God) are not only tangential, but even harmful, to perfection. (It is not necessary to emphasize how much Spinoza’s view, in this regard, differs from the mainstream Western philosophical tradition.) In one passage, Spinoza explicitly states that the mind that lingers on universals cannot make the kind of epistemic progress that matters for perfection (TIE C. 41). But it follows already from the classification of good and evil that on Spinoza’s view everyday moral judgments trade in universals, i.e. in abstract models exemplifying subjective perfection and imperfection, or good and bad. The judgments that constitute the fabric of our everyday morality are dispensed with once human perfection - blessedness - is realized, Spinoza suggests.

Thus, in order to be blessed, we have to cease to judge things in terms of good and evil. This does not mean that things will not appear as good and evil to us - they might. Yet, we can withhold assent to these ideas when they are accompanied by other ideas - ideas of the actual ontological status of good and evil, for instance.
To summarize what we have so far, Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection - blessedness - is contemplative rather than active, in the sense that its locus is the intellect, and not the free will, understood as something which can act independently of how we are disposed through our ideas and desires. It is true that Spinoza considers the highest good of the mind to consist in our active knowledge (cognitio) of God (4p28). (Spinoza uses cognitio, a word with active connotations, signifying our cognition or grasping of God.) This does not mean, however, that God is good, apart from insofar as knowledge of him is useful for us in our striving after realizing our perfection or being.

2.3.2. The paradox of Spinoza’s theory of human perfection revisited.

How are we to know or contemplate things in order to be blessed? I will only focus on one aspect of this question here, one that will allow us to return to the paradox stated at the end of the previous chapter.

Interestingly, Spinoza prescribes contemplation of things as they follow from God as the kind of knowledge most conducive to perfection. More specifically, it is intuitive knowledge of how finite things are inscribed in Nature, and thereby necessitated, which Spinoza explicitly calls the third kind of knowledge: “This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things” (2p40s, cf. 5p25d). Everything that follows from the absolute nature of some attribute of God’s is necessary (see 1p21: Spinoza writes ‘eternal’, but eternity is a modal concept for Spinoza, and more precisely, a kind of necessary existence: see 1d8).

For this reason, whatever it means exactly to “proceed from an adequate idea” of divine attributes to “adequate knowledge of the essence of things”, it is clear that it involves at least that we consider the essences of things as necessarily being the way they are. It is thus from this third kind of knowledge of things as necessary that intellectual love of God arises (5p32c). Since love of God is the ultimate kind of perfection, human nature achieves its ultimate perfection in the contemplation of things as necessary. This, however, has rarely noted prima facie paradoxical consequences for Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection. For one thing, if the third
kind of knowledge involves realizing the necessity of things, then it seems that insofar as one knows oneself by the third kind of knowledge, one knows oneself and one’s knowledge to be necessary. But if oneself and one’s mental state are already necessitated, then how can one call this ideal of perfection normatively enjoined?

As far as I can see, only one response can accommodate at once Spinoza’s necessitarianism, the third kind of knowledge which realizes the truth of this necessitarianism in the case of individual essences, and the normative dimension of perfection. According to this response, human perfection consists in realizing that you (as everything else) are what you should be, namely what you necessarily are. Spinoza speaks of the human essence as strivings (conatus). According to a plausible understanding of the relevant passages, the conatus-doctrine does not merely state that we, and indeed all things, strive after merely maintaining our being, reality or perfection but that we additionally strive after enhancing it.\footnote{Many readings of Spinoza’s conatus align the concept with Nietzsche’s doctrine of a will to power - thus rejecting Nietzsche’s own critique of Spinoza. For Nietzsche himself tended to identify Spinoza’s conatus with self-preservation rather than self-expansion, whereas Spinoza’s actual doctrine is arguably closer to Nietzsche’s than the latter himself cares to admit (possibly because of his reliance on Kuno Fischer’s work). This advocacy of the Spinoza-Nietzsche alliance with respect to the importance of power as necessarily expanding and self-outpouring is in Wurzer (1975), Yovel (1999), and Pethick (2015, p. 65). As far as I can see, Spinoza and Nietzsche diverge not so much on the issue of self-expansion as on the possibility of self-diminution: a topic I will here set aside.}

But, if the highest kind of perfection consists in the third kind of knowledge, then when one oneself is the object of that knowledge, one must realize that any degree of perfection/reality/being one has is necessitated.

One’s striving obliges one to become more: to gain in perfection or being. But as a human being one gains most in being by obtaining the third kind of knowledge. The paradox can, then, be articulated as follows: one only becomes what one’s striving dictates one should be when one realizes that one already is what one strives to become.

\footnote{One could perhaps enlist Spinoza’s highly technical distinction between formal and actual essence here, arguing that the conatus-doctrine specifies that we strive after becoming in existence what we are in our formal, rather than in our actual, essences. However, since Spinoza does not couch his own doctrine in these terms, I will not do so, either. I think a simpler reading also makes for a deeper one, in this case.}
The apparent paradox is to be explained as follows. One is already necessitated by God or Nature, whether one realizes this or not. In TIE [13] (C. 10-11), Spinoza writes that a perfect human nature is characterized by “knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature”. On my reading, this means that the mind already has a union of with the whole of Nature, and that a human being is considered perfect when it achieves occurrent knowledge of this union. Thus understood, the perfection of human nature consists in a way of regarding reality that does not, as such, alter external reality. But the realization is nonetheless transformative.

Nothing in reality is changed by the cessation of the illusory existence of good and evil. It may be objected that if the content - the ideas - entertained by some mind changes, then surely reality changes. For the mind is a part of reality. But, crucially, and as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, inadequacy is for Spinoza negation of reality, and more specifically, the negation of some true and adequate idea (or some aspect of such an idea). Crucially, that idea, which the inadequate idea negates, is already entertained by God - this claim I will introduce in Chapter 3. Thus, what does not change by humans shedding their inadequate ideas is the sum total of reality. Nonetheless, it makes much difference, for a mind, if God’s adequate ideas are being thought by it. Nature remains the same in the sense that it always remains equally real overall, but the human self is deeply transformed when it contemplates itself in the absence of beings of reason, in the way it must do if it is ever to claim the third kind of knowledge.

Conclusion: The status of Spinoza’s ideal of perfection.

What kind of ethics follows from Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection?

Because Spinoza presents an account of the good as the end product of desire, and a conatus-doctrine which obliges each thing to seek to persevere in “being” (esse: 3p6), Spinoza’s moral theory is often interpreted as commanding nothing but
shrewd egoism. Yet, any morality of prudence would be ultimately practical. But the ultimate ideal of perfection which Spinoza advances in the *Ethics* is not practical, and hence not even ethical by our contemporary standards. It is instead intellectual. This way of putting the matter is tendentious, however. It is more accurate to state that the intellectual pursuit of love of God is, for Spinoza, *more* ethical than common morality, since it is the pursuit of the only good that has solid metaphysical founding: true knowledge of God and of things as being in him. For Spinoza insists that: “The mind conceives nothing under a species of eternity except insofar as it conceives its body’s essence under a species of eternity […] that is […] except insofar as it is eternal” (5p31d). But how can *modes* aspire to eternity, when eternity is defined as the kind of necessary existence peculiar to *substance* (see 1d8)? I cannot here answer this question in full. But it is clear that modes can only be regarded as enjoying eternity or necessary existence when they are seen as necessitated by God. God, in turn, can only be regarded as necessitating things when contemplated as absolutely infinite (consult the demonstration of 1p16). Human perfection consists in the contemplation of this divine necessitation, and since common sense morality is in opposition to that contemplation, such morality may even impede our ethical progress. This impractical vision of human perfectibility may be unpalatable for perfectionists who deny the existence of an object worthy of a contemplation at the summit of human perfection, but it is nonetheless the ideal Spinoza embraces in the *Ethics*.

Previously, we saw that the intellectual ideal of the third kind of knowledge, when combined with necessitarianism, gave rise to an apparent paradox at the heart of Spinoza’s ethics. The problem remains whether it can be consistently maintained that our perfection consists in acknowledging the perfection we have regardless of

---

68 For instance, Melamed (2011, pp. 158-9) contends that: “Spinoza’s ‘moral theory’ is essentially nothing but a theory of prudence. It begins with a clear egoistic foundation and proceeds to show that a prudent egoist would in many respects behave in a way that would be judged righteous by common morality, and that he would adopt characteristics that fit the common understanding of virtue”.

69 Recent scholars have emphasized how Spinoza’s intellectual ideal of perfection is tributary to the philosophies of medieval Jewish rationalists such as Gersonides and Maimonides. Placing Spinoza in this intellectual context helps elucidate his ideal of perfection. See for example, Ravven (2014) and Nadler (2014).
whether we acknowledge it or not. Before adjudicating this problem, however, it is necessary to first substantiate my claim that Spinoza’s cognitive ideal of human perfection is indeed based on reality, and not on some human fiction. This will be my task in the following chapter.
Chapter 3

Knowledge of God in Spinoza’s Ontological Account of Human Perfection

Introduction.

In previous chapters, I explored the ethical consequences of Spinoza’s dual use of the word ‘perfection’, distinguishing between an ontologically solid concept of perfection, and subjective perfection, which (together with subjective imperfection, and good and evil) lacks ontological grounding. If Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is ontological, it should ultimately be described in terms which do not appeal to what is (subjectively) perfect, imperfect, good or evil. But I have not yet shown that Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is ontologically solid in the relevant sense. This will be my task in this chapter. In subsequent chapters, the most important result of this chapter will be readdressed and refined. What is that result? It is that, on my reading, Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is ontological rather than subjective because it is contemplative. More precisely, contemplating or understanding maximizes one’s reality or perfection. In this chapter I will present two features of Spinoza’s epistemology, both of which concern his understanding of ideas, with the purpose of showing how these features allow for Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection to be a form of intellectual participation in God’s perfection.

As previously discussed, Spinoza uses ‘perfection’ in two senses - as a teleological notion established on subjective and anthropocentric standards in 4app, and in an “objective” ontological sense, as at least extensionally identical with reality or being (see 1p11s; 1p16d and 2d6). This latter a-teleological (but theological) perfection is attributed to the world in 1p33s2 and Letter 36. Because of this ambiguous usage of the word ‘perfection’, the following question naturally arises: is Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection at least partially ontological or is it
altogether teleological and thus merely subjective? Differently put, does Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection have any ontological grounding?

It is fairly evident that for Spinoza, human beings possess maximal perfection through their knowledge of God - consider, for instance, the demonstration of proposition 5p27, where Spinoza states that “he who knows things through [the knowledge of God or the third kind of knowledge] passes to the summit of human perfection” (cf. TTP IV). Because of passages in this vein, it is clear that for Spinoza, human perfection is achieved through knowledge of God/Nature, an absolutely infinite being. There are at least two different ways in which knowledge can be an increase in reality on the part of the knower. Knowledge can be an increase in reality, if we really become more causally powerful by entertaining the idea of God - perhaps because it inspires in us a superior affect. I will deal with how love of God is superior to other mental states in this way in Chapter 8. Knowledge can also be an increase in reality if the object of knowledge has a surplus of reality in which the subject of knowledge could come to share. But, how is it possible, by merely having an idea, to participate in the ontological perfection of the object the idea intends? In this chapter I will argue that it is Spinoza’s theory of ideas that makes such participation possible.\(^\text{70}\)

The chapter is structured as follows: (3.1) I situate my reading in the contemporary landscape of Spinoza studies by showing how it answers a puzzle outlined by Jarrett (2014); (3.2) I suggest that the ideal of perfection which Spinoza advances in the Ethics is predicated on solid metaphysical foundations.

---

\(^{70}\) Koistinen (1998) has suggested that for Spinoza, the objects of truths are not the same as what the truths are about. On Koistinen’s proposal, I may know a truth about, for instance, a rabbit persisting in time, but the object of that truth is an eternally existing proposition. Koistinen’s distinction may pose a problem for my theory of Spinozist perfection, since the mind should be perfected by its own objects (what is “in it”) rather than by the object the idea is about. For this reason, Koistinen’s interpretation of the objects of ideas as being eternal propositions may not be compatible with my claims in this chapter. But nor do they appear to be compatible with Spinoza’s texts. For example, if the object of my idea of my body is merely some proposition - for example the proposition that my body exists at such and such times - then the mind’s eternity would come down to the eternity of that proposition. But this clearly can’t be the prospect of eternity that Spinoza is so enthusiastic about in Part 5 of the Ethics. I confess that this does not amount to a refutation of Koistinen’s view.
This is not a very controversial claim in Spinoza studies, but in making this suggestion, I hope to disentangle Spinoza’s notions of perfection and goodness in such a way that the subsequent discussion can be carried out with greater clarity. (3.3) I advance the bolder interpretative claim that it is because Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is contemplative that there can be solid metaphysical grounds for the perfection such an ideal proposes. More precisely, my claim is that it is thanks to Spinoza’s theory of ideas that knowledge of God perfects the mind. The relevant features of Spinoza’s theory of ideas are: (3.3.1) the sameness of the (formal) reality of the thing and the (objective) reality of an adequate idea intending that thing; and (3.3.2) the sameness of any volition (i.e. affirmation or negation) toward an idea and aspects of that very idea. (3.4) I discuss the consequences of Spinoza’s understanding of ideas for the ontological status of his ideal of human perfection. Finally (3.5), I conclude the chapter by answering Jarrett.

3.1. Human perfection and knowledge of God.

Spinoza’s ambiguous use of the word perfection - one the one hand, as co-extensional with reality, and on the other hand, as a being of reason, naturally invites a debate about the status of the perfection of the model (exemplar) Spinoza sets for human nature in Pref4, in the following words:

But though this is so [i.e. although our concepts of good, evil, perfection and imperfection do not capture reality as it is], still we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model.

The debate about the nature of the model Spinoza speaks of in this passage is still ongoing in the scholarship. Instead of supplying a summary of all positions, I will outline the chief difficulties. Then I will state how my reading presents an answer
to one of these difficulties - to address all of them is a task beyond the scope of the present chapter.

Is the model of human nature which Spinoza advances a universal - and therefore an inadequate idea - or is it an adequate idea? As we have seen, universals are for Spinoza confused and inadequate ideas. As Spinoza’s aetiology of universals in the 2p40s is intended to show, such notions cannot be about real beings. For they are merely the products of the limitations of the human memory, a kind of mnemotechnics which enables us to retain and refer to a collection of items without paying attention to all the small differences that qualify each particular as it really is.

Even before the Ethics, Spinoza gave voice to similar views. His position on universals appears remarkably consistent throughout his career. See for instance KV, I, VI, C. 87, where he writes: “[Aristotle’s followers] say that God has no knowledge of particular and transient things, but only of the general, which, in their opinion, are imperishable. We have, however, rightly considered this to be due to their ignorance. For it is precisely the particular things, and they alone, that have a cause, and not the general, because they are nothing.”

If human nature is itself a universal, then any idea we form of it will be inadequate. One way of approaching the question of the status of Spinoza’s model for human nature therefore consists in adjudicating whether human nature is a universal or not. Diane Steinberg (1984) has argued that for Spinoza, humankind

---

71 Spinoza should not be read as making the claim that since no individuals can be exactly alike in all respects, there can be no adequate universals. Plausibly, two birds can be non-black in exactly the same respect, although they are red in different ways. However, the absence of black in the birds is a negative property, and thus not a genuine (natural or real) one. Whenever genuine (positive) properties are instantiated, it might be argued, they are so in different ways. However, I do not see Spinoza’s point about universals as depending upon the claim that all instantiated universals (all tropes) are distinct in ways other than their spatiotemporal location. His point is rather that when we think of the redness of this bird and the redness of that bird under one rubric, what we think about is not a real being, but an abstraction we make on the basis of our memory and sensual impressions.

72 That God’s predestination extends to the species but not to the individual specimen is exactly Maimonides’ view with respect to the non-human animals. It therefore seems to me plausible that Spinoza includes Maimonides among “Aristotle’s followers”.
is an individual, and human nature the essence of this individual.\textsuperscript{73} Although I find Steinberg’s reasoning promising, I cannot here provide any discussion of Spinoza’s view on human nature \textit{per se}.

Moving on to the model itself, there are two principal questions, one of which will be my concern in what follows. First, there is the exegetical question: does the model Spinoza speaks of in 4pref correspond to the notion of the “free man” he discusses in 4p66s-4p72? This is a widely debated issue; I do not set out to decide the case here.\textsuperscript{75}

The second, related, question concerns what human perfection is, for Spinoza.

One traditional (Aristotelian) feature of Spinoza’s thinking about human excellence, is that the highest good within the reach of human beings is the exertion of reason: “In this life, therefore, it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, \textit{or} reason. In this one thing consists man’s highest happiness \textit{or} blessedness” (4app) However, “perfecting the intellect”, for Spinoza, “is nothing but understanding God” (4app). And the mind’s highest good is explicitly specified as knowing a privileged object of knowledge, namely, God, in 4p28. In spite of these explicit statements, specification is still needed. The question I will deal with in this chapter is how exactly the good of theological knowledge is related to human perfection. On the reading I advance, there is a strong ontological foundation for the (highest) perfection of the human being in the perfection of its divine object of contemplation.

This is contrary to an interpretation recently put forth by Jarrett. According to Jarrett’s interesting reading, the good, as Spinoza defines it, is not “naturalistic” or

\textsuperscript{73} This seems consistent, given that the principle of individuation which Spinoza offers in the \textit{Ethics} is a constant ratio of motion and rest (2lemma3), a criterion which humankind can at least principally be construed as meeting.

\textsuperscript{75} For more discussion of Spinoza’s use of the generic term ‘man’, and whether it (dis)qualifies as a universal term or not, see Haserot (1950, pp. 487-489) and Hübner (2014).

\textsuperscript{75} See Youpa (2010) and Jarrett (2014, pp. 57-85) for two partially overlapping lists of references to the debate of the status of the free man in Spinoza’s TIE and \textit{Ethics}.
“realistic”, since it “is defined as what brings us closer to our ideal”. As Jarrett puts it:

Spinoza’s metaethics, regarding at least ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (or ‘evil’), is thus constructivist, because it maintains that these terms are applicable only in relation to a constructed, or invented, concept of an ideal person (‘man’). Whether, after the construction, we should say that these terms express ‘natural properties’ or ‘real properties’ (or relations) is perhaps conceivable, and while we might suppose this to be so, I will argue that Spinoza rejects it. His own view is that his constructivism is incompatible with metaethical naturalism and with metaethical realism. (2014, p 59).

Jarrett’s reasoning is that since (i) the good is defined in instrumental terms, and (ii) Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection does not correspond to any real (or natural) property, (iii) the good also does not correspond to any such property. Hence Spinoza’s meta-ethics is constructivist vis-à-vis the good. While I agree with Jarrett about (i), I disagree about (ii) and hence (iii) does not, on my reading, follow on these grounds. In this chapter I will attack (ii), arguing that Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is indeed predicated on solid ontological grounds, and also show how this can be the case.

Let me first note the reason that leads Jarrett to accept (ii). Jarrett acknowledges that there is such a thing as ontological perfection, but, like many commentators, he disputes that it can be relevant for human perfection. The reason why is that, according to Jarrett’s reading of Spinoza, ontological perfection, or reality, is normatively neutral:

Is ‘perfection’, understood as reality, an ‘ethical term’? No, or at least not always. For Spinoza explicitly holds in Letter 23 that stealing and donating to charity may be equally perfect. (He seems equally willing to say the same about murder and donating to charity.) Nothing that is real, he maintains, is imperfect (2014, p. 70).

In a similar vein, Broad (2001, pp. 15-16) construes Spinoza’s ethics as separable from the topic of knowledge of God. Such a separation is only justifiable on the assumption made by Jarrett, that is, on the assumption that human perfection is distinct form ontological perfection.
Of course, if there is only one kind of ontologically solid perfection, and it is assumed to be normatively neutral, then any ideal of human perfection with some normative force must involve a fundamentally different kind of perfection. But it seems to me that Jarrett is assuming that because a certain perfection is coextensive with reality, it must be normatively neutral. But why must reality be normatively neutral?

It is certainly the case that in contemporary philosophy the concepts of being or reality are generally devoid of normative connotations. This contemporary intuition was not always in vogue. A few examples to the contrary are sufficient to indicate this. First, as previously discussed, in the doctrine of transcendentals (transcendentia), medieval philosophers developed a thick theory of being as convertible with the one, the true and the good. The transcendental good which characterizes all that is, insofar as it is, is not normatively neutral. The fact that good is predicated transcendentally of all that is testified, in the eyes of the medievals, to the supreme goodness of the creator of all being, God. Consider for instance Augustine’s influential dictum that “Since God is good, we are, and insofar as we are, we are good” (quia Deus est bonus, nos sumus et inquantum sumus, boni sumus). The description of being as good because of God’s being, is certainly normative in that it enjoins a certain positive evaluation of being, or, if you prefer, a certain pro-attitude towards being. Second, before Spinoza, in several significant traditions, fullness of being, whether it be through the contemplation of what truly is (Plato’s ideas) or the singularly most real being (ens realissimum), was considered to have a normative pull on creatures characterized by a more limited form of being.

An objection against establishing any parallel between Spinoza and the historical cases I have mentioned, would be that normative concepts (whether we are talking about perfection or goodness) presuppose some kind of purposiveness. Someone or something must be able to be swayed by the good; someone or something must

---

76 There are, of course, exceptions in contemporary metaphysics too, such as the axiarchism of Leslie (1979).
be able to choose the good on account of their finding it good. But Spinoza, according to the mainstream reading at least, attempted to rid philosophy of the explanatory model of final causality. I will not adjudicate the extent to which there is still room for finality in the human realm here.\textsuperscript{77} Let me note, instead, that the objection just stated presupposes that all normative concepts are inherently directive. Perhaps the objector even assumes that any norm sets down standards for what we should do, \textit{provided that we could have done otherwise}. Yet, any ethics Spinoza can propose must be compatible with the absence of contrafactual freedom, that is, compatible with the absence of a freedom to act otherwise than one in fact acts. On the alternative reading I advance, Spinoza’s project is to articulate an ethics based on evaluative rather than directive normativity. If ethics is evaluative rather than directive then the role of values need not to be that of motivators or reasons inclining a will that has a freedom to do otherwise. Ethics can then instead be about rightly estimating the values of things - even, it may be argued, if we do so inevitably.

My point is, in short, that I can see no reason for entirely removing Spinoza’s notion of ontological perfection from the ethical realm unless one begs the question of what we should take this realm to be. In spite of what slogans such as ‘ought implies can’ may lead one to believe, one has yet to exactly define that realm. If ethics is equated with the question of how we ought to act, then it is not immediately evident how ontological perfection/reality can be ethically relevant. If, however, ethics is equated with the question of what is worth contemplating (if the highest good is contemplative), then the significance of ontological perfection for ethical theory becomes readily apparent. For that which is most perfect should be most worthy of contemplation. It is, in other words, a question of our outlook deciding what is ethical.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{77} It is certainly the case that God, for Spinoza, does not act on account of any good external to his nature (1app). The question is whether this is also true of finite creatures. For a challenge of the mainstream reading, according to which the situation of finite creatures is no more describable in teleological terms than that of God, see Don Garrett (1999).

\textsuperscript{78} Although philosophers often treat the difference between metaphysics and ethics as a matter of course, the difference fluctuates with cultural and linguistic parameters. In his pathbreaking work on Daoist thought, Hansen (1996), for example, emphasizes how the linguistic fact that there is no morphological difference between the imperative and indic-
On my reading, if Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection can be ontological rather than subjective, this is because, for Spinoza, the ideal in question is cognitive. Contemplating or understanding that which is most perfect maximizes one’s reality or perfection. This explains why it is the case that when an (ideal) person obtains knowledge of God, she attains the ideal limit of human perfection. Because Jarrett (2014, pp 63-9) denies that ontological perfection is ethically relevant, he does not provide any such explanation in his justification of Spinoza’s model. In other words, he does not explain what it is that makes knowledge of God supremely conducive to perfection in humans. That the reading I propose can offer such an explanation should make it worthy of consideration.

Interestingly, if it is true that for Spinoza the highest good is contemplative/cognitive, then his epistemology is his moral psychology. More clearly put, epistemological conditions will determine one’s ethical progress. In this chapter I will present two features of Spinoza’s epistemology-cum-moral psychology, both of which concern his understanding of ideas, with the purpose of showing how these features allow for a grounding of human perfection in God’s supreme perfection.

3.2. Necessarily self-communicating ontological perfection.

3.2.1. Ontological perfection and love of God.

Surprising terminological equivalences abound in the Ethics and are often signaled by Spinoza’s usage of explicative *sive*, meaning “or, equivalently…” or “or, better yet…” . One, which I have already discussed at some length, is the equivalence between perfection and reality. Another is the equivalence between essence and causal power. God’s ontological perfection/reality, essence, and causal power, are all, at least extensionally speaking, one and the same thing.
For human beings, too, essence is co-extensional with causal power (see 4p20). Spinoza calls this non-absolute, non-infinite causal power *virtue* (4d8). Human essence and human causal power/virtue is the same thing just like the divine essence and power are the same thing. Yet, there are crucial differences between divine essence/power, on the one hand, and human essence/power, on the other. One noteworthy difference between God’s causality and the causality finite things exert is that only finite things can be hampered with from without and prevented from causing effects that their essences would, *ceteris paribus*, result in. The reasoning is nonetheless structurally the same as in God’s case: one’s ontological perfection and one’s essence are proportional, and since one’s causal power is proportional to one’s essence, one’s causal power and one’s ontological perfection are proportional too.

On Jarrett’s reading, it should be noted, neither ‘ontological perfection’ nor ‘human virtue’, which is co-extensional with the former, would qualify as ethical terms. Nonetheless, ‘the good’ is an ethical term for Jarrett, since it is on the basis of this term that he construes Spinoza’s meta-*ethics* as constructivist. If, however, it can be shown that for Spinoza the highest good is defined as such *only* because it alone is most conducive to one’s ontological perfection, then either ontological perfection is “ethical” or (alternatively) the good is not. Let us therefore analyze the link between ontological perfection and the highest good.

The fundamental elements in Spinoza’s account of the inner lives of humans are affects. Affects arise when the mind’s power of thinking changes (3p11). According to Spinoza’s doctrine of mind-body identity, all such changes in the mind’s power of thinking are also changes in the body’s power of acting (see again 3p11). The body’s power of acting and the mind’s power of thinking is the

---

An issue is whether Spinoza can consistently maintain that one’s essence is *power*, and more precisely the power whereby one brings about the effects that characterize one’s *essence*. There seems to be something wrong with this definition. One solution that would perhaps work is a bifurcation of essence, such that one’s actual essence is power, and more precisely the power whereby one brings about the effects that characterize one’s formal essence. Although such a reading is probably compatible Spinoza’s definition of *conatus* as actual rather than formal essence (in 3p7), I cannot elaborate on this suggestion here.
same virtue, the same power of actually bringing about the effects that stem from one's essence but conceived under different attributes. Since, for Spinoza, one's power of acting is one's causal power, by reflecting changes in one's causal power, affects reflect changes in one's ontological perfection. For causal power and perfection are proportional to each other.

According to the system of affects Spinoza elaborates in the third part of his *Ethics*, three affects are primary: joy, sadness and desire. Whereas the affect of joy occurs when we pass from a lesser perfection to a greater, the affect of sadness occurs when we pass from greater to lesser perfection (3p57d). On Spinoza’s view, “[w]e strive to promote the occurrence of anything which we imagine to be conducive to joy and to avoid or destroy whatever we imagine is contrary to it or will be conducive to sadness” (3p28). Regardless of how this striving manifests itself (i.e., as “appetite, will, desire or impulse”) Spinoza counts any human striving after joy and against sadness as desire (see 3DefAff, C. 531).80

Since power and perfection is the same thing (4p20), transitions in perfection are transitions in power. This, however, does not mean that in having a certain affect we are thereby consciously aware of its being a transition in power. Listening to Monteverdi’s “L'Orfeo” may inspire an affect of joy in me, but this does not mean that I, in virtue of having this affect, am also consciously aware of having passed from a lesser to a greater power of acting. Affects can therefore be said to be two-faced: whereas transition in power is the *metaphysical* aspect of an affect, joy, sadness, desire (etc.) are the *phenomenal* aspect of the affect.

We have seen that Spinoza describes the summit of human perfection as mental activity, that the mind’s perfection consists in understanding, and that our highest

---

80 One consequence of Spinoza’s view is that desire after the destruction of the self for its own sake (a drive somewhat akin to what Freud called primary masochism) is metaphysically impossible. For it is not possible for us to rejoice in any form of loss of power as such. Although this problem has, to my knowledge at least, never been raised in the secondary literature, it seems to pose some problems for the plausibility of Spinoza’s view given human psychology. At the very least, Spinoza’s theory of the affects is untenable if one accepts the Freudian view that the erotic and the thanatian are closely connected and at times confounded. For reasons of scope, I cannot pursue this line of inquiry here.
good is knowledge of God (4p28). Moreover, Spinoza maintains, from the third kind of knowledge of God, love invariably follows, the intellectual love of God (5p32; 5p33). Love is defined as a species of Joy (Def.of.Aff.[VI]). However, love of God is not exactly joy. For while joy, as we have seen, consists in a transition in ontological perfection, love of God does not involve any transition in one’s ontological perfection. Spinoza cautions the reader who would take him at his words in 5p33s:

Although this [intellectual] love toward God has had no beginning [by 5p33] it still has all the perfections of Love, just as if it had come to be (as we feigned in 5p32c). There is no difference here, except that the Mind has had eternally the same perfection which, in our fiction, now came to it, and that it is accompanied by the idea of God as an eternal cause. 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 (5p33s: Emphasis added).

Let me unpack this statement a little. Love of God consists in an eternal perfection. This means a perfection the mind cannot but have. The “fiction” Spinoza speaks of is thus that this perfection would arise in a mind at any given point in time. Contrary to this fiction, on Spinoza’s view, we are always eternally perfect. But how can this be? Our perfection (blessedness, freedom) consists in love of God. But this love is a certain mental state that accompanies an idea of “God as an eternal cause”. Certainly, we do not always entertain this idea? Certainly, there are people now that do not think of God in this way? How can Spinoza then maintain that the human mind “eternally ha[s] the perfection” which consists in love of God?

If Spinoza is to be able to maintain that the mind eternally has the perfection of an idea of God, accompanied by the mode of thought which is love, he needs to maintain that this idea can perfect our mind even when we are unaware of it. But in order to be an idea that as it were perfects our minds from within, must not the idea in question be consciously entertained? It would be strange if our ethical perfection consisted in an idea being suppressed in some corner of our subconscious. In order for an idea to perfect a mind, it may be surmised, that idea must be actively entertained. However, it is evident that the idea in question is not
actively entertained by each human mind. So how can it then perfect the mind that it is in? One possible solution to this conundrum that I would here like to propose is that the idea is sufficiently attended to by God’s intellect. Yet the idea cannot at any time be entirely absent from the human mind, for how then could the human mind be *eternally* endowed with the perfection that the idea confers upon it? In order for the mind to always possess the perfection the idea confers upon it, the idea must evidently always be in the human mind. But it is apparent - it is a datum of experience - that not everyone is conscious of God “as an eternal cause” or conscious of the love that supposedly accompanies this idea. Hence, it does not follow simply from an idea’s being in a mind (and even perfecting a mind) that the mind the idea is in actively or even consciously intends it. A mind can be perfected by subconsciously entertaining an idea as long as it is actively entertained by God. This points at an interesting aspect of Spinoza’s theory of mind.\(^{81}\)

For most, the go-to theory about the status of our latent ideas would be that they are stored in some subconscious deposit (from where they can, perhaps deviously, affect our occurrent ideas, and thus our courses of action). For Spinoza, by contrast, it appears to be the case that our latent and true ideas are indeed consciously entertained, if not by us then by God. *God’s intellect is our subconscious deposit of truth.* While I cannot here resolve the difficulties this doctrine involves, it is important to note that God entertains our latent ideas, if they are true and adequate. (I will return to whether this theory of latency is consistent with other Spinozist doctrines shortly.)

We are thus, on this reading, eternally perfected by an idea of which we are not always consciously aware. In response to the difficulty of squaring the eternal and the transitional (allegedly fictional) aspects of love of God, I would like to propose that the human mind’s change consists in beginning to attend, in time, to something that is eternally present to it. There is, I suggest, a transition involved in love of God, and this transition consists in becoming aware of one’s idea of

\(^{81}\) Alanen (2011, p. 15) has previously brought attention to the ambiguities surrounding the subject of representation that beset Spinoza’s philosophy of mind.
God, an idea which is however always present whether one is conscious of it or not. Love of God is *a summit of perfection that humans have already reached*, and yet they do not necessarily know that they have reached it. There is thus room for some improvement in this regard. Presently, I am interested in the following question: why is the idea which love of God necessarily accompanies always in the mind in such a way that human beings can participate in the perfection of God?

Before I analyze how Spinoza’s theory of ideas makes this possible, allow me to briefly comment on the development of the Spinozist good.

3.2.2. A good that communicates itself.

In his early text TIE, Spinoza asks whether there is an object which invariably inspires an affect of joy:

> After experience had taught me that all things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which are 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 [communicabile sui], and which would alone affect the mind, all others being rejected, whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy [laetitia], to eternity (C. 7, G. II/6).

It may be useful to note that Spinoza’s description of a true good in TIE is twofold. On the one hand, a true good (it may be inferred from this passage) is true because it, unlike the “empty and futile things” which we normally pursue, is good “in itself”. That is, a good worthy of its name must not be a good that is construed as such because of the way it affects the mind. On the other hand, it is not enough for there to exist a “true good”. The true good must also be capable of
communicating itself (*communicabile sui*).\(^{82}\) Let me comment on these two conditions in turn.

In TIE, as we have seen, Spinoza seems to assert that the true good should be non-relational - that is, it should not be constituted as good because of the way it affects the mind, but rather intrinsically good, or good in itself. By contrast, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza seems to have abandoned his search after a non-relational good. In this text, Spinoza instead defines the good in subjectivist terms as what is most useful to some agent (3p9s). All agents (indeed, all things) invariably strive after preserving their being (3p7, Cf. TIE C. 9).\(^{83}\) Being [*esse*] is co-extensional with ontological perfection (see 1p10s: *realitatem sive esse*). *The highest good is therefore what is most useful for the preservation, and arguably the enhancement, of our ontological perfection.* Ontological perfection or reality is, by contrast, not instrumentally defined. That is, on my reading, because it is valuable in itself. It is indeed since being is valuable in itself that it can be the case that “[n]o one strives to preserve his being for the sake of anything else” (4p25).

It has been asserted that Spinoza’s subjectivist view of the good is difficult to square with his doctrine of a highest good.\(^{84}\) However, although this might be

\(^{82}\) The expression Spinoza employs here - *bonum communicabile sui* - has rich roots in the philosophical tradition. Consider for instance the equivalent dictum *bonum est communicativum sui*, accepted by Thomas Aquinas and originating in Dionysius the Aeropagite.

\(^{83}\) It is commonly suggested that by being (*esse*), Spinoza does not only mean our mundane existence, which would render his conatus-doctrine incompatible with passages such as 4p72d, where the free man would rather die than be insincere. For such a reading, see for instance, Nadler (2015); Lebuffe (2005), does not deny that Spinoza means this, but argues that the self-preservation of *esse* nonetheless generally implies the preservation of one’s mundane existence.

\(^{84}\) Lebuffe’s reading thus presents, and proposes a solution, the following problem of coherence: “[I]t seems on the face of it that Spinoza, if he were consistent in holding that goods are always instrumental to self-preservation, ought to deny that there is such a thing as a summum bonum. He ought to hold the view that, just because all goods are instrumental, no goods are complete” (2005, p. 244). Lebuffe’s solution consists in a division between intensional and extensional senses of consciousness. Humans are intensionally conscious of desiring knowledge of God, and therefore knowledge of God qualifies as the highest good. Humans are extensionally conscious of striving after persevering in being, and this striving accounts for their pursuit of what perseveres their being: knowledge of God. I agree with Lebuffe that God is the highest good simply because he is what best leads to perseverance in being. Yet, my approach differs from Lebuffe’s in that I seek out the answer to the question of why God is useful in this way in Spinoza’s theory of ideas.
true, there is nothing intrinsically incoherent about there being something that is uniquely most useful for humans’ preservation of being. For Spinoza, knowledge of God is simply what best preserves the being, or ontological perfection, of human beings. Importantly, the reason why perfection is to be preserved or enhanced is not answered by subordinating perfection to some further purpose.

In short, while there is, on this reading of the Ethics, a highest good, since there is one good (i.e. knowledge of God) whereby our ontological perfection is maximized, there is no “good in itself”, no “true good”\(^85\): nothing that would qualify as good in the absence of its utility or disutility for an agent’s striving to persevere in her being - or, which is the same, in her ontological perfection.

Let us move on to the second characteristic of the true good in TIE. In this text, Spinoza asserted, that the good, if it is to be worthy of our pursuit, must be capable of communicating itself. This is an interesting claim. Even though, in the TIE, the true good is supposedly intrinsically such, that is not enough. The true good must also be such that people can come to share in it. Since the good that interests Spinoza is intellectual, it is a good that we can come to share in by intellectual means. This Spinoza maintains not only in the TIE but also in the “Dialogue” of the KV, where Love, addressing the Intellect, asks:

I see, Brother, that my being and perfection depend entirely on your perfection, and since the perfection of the object you have conceived is your perfection, and mine in turn proceeds from yours, tell me, I beg you, whether you have conceived a supremely perfect being, which cannot be limited by anything else, and in which I too am conceived? (C. 73).

The cited passage interestingly indicates that the perfection of the intellect is identical with the perfection of its object. It may be surmised that the perfection of love which “proceeds” from that of the intellect is likewise identical with the

---

\(^85\) In the Ethics, Spinoza prefers the locution sumnum bonum to that of a true good. Perhaps this is not accidental, but indicates, instead, a deep difference between his early and mature thinking. On my reading, an instrumental good can be the highest possible if it is most conducive to (perseveration in) being. I do not agree with Lebuffe’s equation (2005, p. 244) of sumnum bonum with a good in itself, a so-called complete good.
perfection of the object that the intellect conceives. It is for this reason that Love beseeches the Intellect to search after a “supremely perfect” object. The intellect can come to share in the perfection of objects it (adequately) conceives. This is clearly a bold view.

Yet, in the Ethics, Spinoza’s view on the communicable good is even bolder than in his earlier texts. In this text, Spinoza advances the view that it is not only the case that there is a highest good which is communicable; it is also the case that a human being cannot be conceived unless she has the capacity to rejoice in this good. Spinoza makes this claim in a passage which defends the commonality of the highest good, and he does so in the following words:

If anybody asks, what if the highest good of those who follow after virtue were not common to all? Would it not thence follow that men who live according to the guidance of reason, that is to say men in so far as they agree in nature, would be contrary to one another? We reply that it arises from no accident, but from the nature itself of reason, that the highest good of man is common to all, in-as-much as it is deduced from the human essence itself, in so far as it is determined by reason, and also because man could not be or be conceived if he had not the power of rejoicing in this highest good. For it pertains to the essence of the human mind to have an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God (4p36s, emphasis added).

What does Spinoza mean by having “the power to rejoice in the highest good”? In the light of the preceding passages - where we saw that the participation in the highest good was described in intellectual terms - to rejoice in a good presumably means to pass to a greater perfection by intending that good as the object of one’s idea. And to have the power to rejoice in an eternal good partly means for the idea of this good to already constitute one’s ontological perfection.

Here a by now familiar inconsistency reemerges. The relevant idea is eternally present to us and so, if its object can “communicate” its perfection to us, we must always possess it already. But joy is an affect and as such it signifies a transition in one’s perfection. But of course, a perfection that is eternally the same cannot fluctuate.
Again, I believe that this difficulty is to be resolved by invoking the difference between an idea’s being in a mind and the same idea being consciously intended by that mind. In spite of the fact that an eternal idea is in one’s mind and perfects it from within, one does not merely in virtue of possessing the idea possess it *consciously*. To have the power to rejoice in an eternal good therefore means to be able to rejoice when one comes to consciously intend the idea. In order to be able to distinguish between these two ways in which a mind may be perfect - because it is what it is and because it recognizes itself as being what it is - I will call the latter kind of perfection *speculative*. *Speculum* means mirror, and speculative perfection arises when the idea that perfects a mind, whether the mind in question knows it or not, is indeed consciously “mirrored” in that mind.

As far as I can see, knowledge of God interests Spinoza most at the moment when it becomes known to us - when we come to consciously intend the idea that is already in our mind. It is when we are consciously aware of having this (eternal) idea that we rejoice. Our joy is then a transition in *speculative perfection*: the kind of perfection we possess by consciously acknowledging the ontological perfection we already possess.

Below, I will outline the features of Spinoza’s theory of ideas that are relevant for explaining why knowledge of God perfects a mind. I submit that the relevant features are the two doctrines of “sameness”: on the one hand, the sameness of the (formal) reality of the thing and the (objective) reality of the idea adequately intending that thing; and on the other hand, the sameness of any volition (e.g. an affirmation or a negation) toward an object and aspects of the idea that represents that object. The former sameness will be conducive to ontological perfection and the latter sameness conducive to speculative perfection. Allow me to first treat the reason why a mind that possesses an idea of a God is thereby automatically rendered perfect.
3.3. Two doctrines of sameness.

3.3.1. The sameness of formal and objective reality.

According to Spinoza’s so-called doctrine of parallelism, “[t]he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (2p7). It should be noted that when Spinoza speaks of “ideas” in 2p7, he is not referring to the inadequate ideas of human minds, but to God’s ideas, all of which are adequate [2p36d].) Parallelism may appear to be an ill-chosen name, since two parallel things are usually not identical. By contrast, according to Spinoza, “a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing but expressed in two ways” (2p7s). Spinoza, it seems, takes “one and the same thing” to imply that the idea and the thing are indeed numerically the same, but expressed in two profoundly different ways under the two attributes of extension and thought.

Moreover, on Spinoza’s view, ideas and the bodily things these ideas intend have a number of properties which they do not, indeed cannot, share. For, on Spinoza’s view, mentality and physicality are both causally closed (see 2p6). This means that no minds can be the causes of bodily events (Spinoza would write: of other bodies) and likewise, no bodies the causes of mental events (Spinoza would write: of other ideas). And yet, a body and the idea intending that body are supposedly identical. This seems puzzling. How can X and Y be identical without sharing all their properties? By invoking the tool of intensional properties, Michael Della Rocca (1996) has presented an intriguing solution to this puzzle. Intensionality is an important topic in Spinoza research. In this chapter, however, I am not

---

86 As previously noted, Melamed (2013a, p. 152) has convincingly argued that Spinoza espouses not one, but two, doctrines of parallelisms (parallelisms that are not even parallel!), namely inter-attribute parallelism between things as conceived under different attributes and parallelism between “content-ideas” and “meta-ideas” within the attribute of thought. In this chapter, I am concerned only with the doctrine of ideas-things parallelism, which is contained within the doctrine of inter-attribute parallelism.

87 For criticism of the notion of intensional properties, see Marshall (2009). Garrett (2017, pp. 12—42) concedes Marshall's point that Della Rocca does not motivate why some properties are intensional and provides a motivation for this in what he calls Spinoza’s strong ontological pluralism of attributes.
concerned with the properties which ideas and things cannot share, but rather with the properties they do share, their “extensional” properties.

Since 2p7 asserts that the “order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things”, having a certain number of causes and effects is one example of such an “trans-attribute” property. By calling the property “trans-attribute” I do not mean that it is a property that a mode can have regardless of its attribute: for if there were no attribute in the first place, a mode could not exert any causation at all. By calling it “trans-attribute” I mean, rather, that the very same property is possessed by the mode in question no matter under which attribute we choose to conceive it. Since one’s power of causing certain effects is the same as one’s ontological perfection/reality/being, it follows that the ontological perfection of a thing is identical with that of the idea which truly intends that thing (in the intellect of God). Indeed, Spinoza states this explicitly in 2p13s:

We cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves as the objects themselves do, and that one is more excellent than the other, and contains more reality, just as the object of the one is more excellent and contains more reality.

For Spinoza, the ideas that are adequate in human minds are also adequate in the divine intellect (see again 2p36d). (I provide a more precise definition of adequacy in Chapter 8, section 2.2.) Regardless of whether the intellect is human or divine, therefore, the ontological perfection of things is “mirrored” in the ideas that intend them, or, to describe it non-metaphorically, the ontological perfection any idea enjoys is the same as the perfection of the thing it (adequately) intends. This is because the perfection of an idea is the same as its causal power to bring about those effects that stem from its essence, and this perfection is the same as the causal power of the thing the idea adequately intends to bring about its essential effects. Perfection is transcendent in that it cuts across attributes and so

---

88 For two notes on the properties that are not specific to any attribute, see Della Rocca (1996, p. 133) and Bennet (1984, pp. 44-45).
unlike properties such as being-caused-by-something-mental or being-caused-by-
something-physical, it is not intensional.

We are justified in asking what this fact about (adequate) ideas in the divine
intellect is supposed to entail for Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection. It seems
plausible that for Spinoza the perfection of a mind depends on the perfection of
the various ideas that are in that mind; after all, for him, a mind is nothing over
and above its constituent ideas.\(^89\) That the presence of an (adequate) idea of God
in the set of ideas that is a mind uniquely perfects that mind most would then
follow from God alone being the most perfect object among the ones intended by
the ideas in question. It is important to realize that this ontological perfection is
possessed by the mind regardless of whether the idea is latently or consciously
entertained.

3.3.2 The sameness of any affirmation or negation of an idea and an
aspect of that idea itself.

Spinoza advances a bold claim in 2p49: “In the Mind there is no volition, or
affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an
idea.” By maintaining that our volitions are already contained in our ideas
Spinoza departs in a crucial way from several major currents in the history of
Western philosophy. I briefly mention two of these.

Descartes is the most obvious polemical target for Spinoza’s claim that volitions
are a subset of the ideas. Because, according to Descartes, the will extended
beyond (indeed, infinitely beyond) the intellect, and this constituted the possibility
of error. In his Fourth Meditation on First Philosophy, Descartes ponders how

\(^89\) Some philosophers (e.g. Koslicki, 2013) have pointed out the need for a more fine-
grained concept of ontological dependence which allows for various ways in which things
can ontologically depend on each other. For Spinoza, it seems that the perfection of a
mind is grounded in the perfection of its ideas because the mind is constituted by its ide-
as. Koslicki calls this relation “constituent dependence” and defines it more precisely as
follows: “An entity, Φ, is constituent dependent on an entity (or entities), Ψ, just in case
Ψ is an essential constituent (or are essential constituents) of Φ” (2013, p. 205). To ex-
plore exactly how minds depend on ideas is a task I reserve for a future paper.
error is possible. He dismisses that error could come to be merely because of the limitations of his faculty of judgment on the grounds that error is not a mere negation, but rather a privation: that is, the absence of some knowledge that should be in him (AT VII 54-55; AT IX 43-44). Since Spinoza, in dismissing teleological explanation, also rejects privation (as we saw in the preceding chapter), he could not accept this account of error. However, the privative absence can obtain, on Descartes’ view, since the will extends beyond the judgment (AT VII 58; AT IX 46). But Spinoza would reject that the will can extend beyond what we cognize on the grounds that any volitional impulse is already contained in the idea it accompanies.

Another philosophical classic against which Spinoza’s moral psychology may be contrasted is Plato’s account in the Republic (starting in IV.435b). Here Plato presents us with three sources of motivation: reason (to logistikon) which loves wisdom, to philosophon, “spirit” (to thumoeides) which loves honor and desire (to epithumetikon), which loves gain. 90 Simply put, ethical progress of the person as a whole is possible for two reasons: first (a), because reason perceives what is best for the complex whole and second (b), because reason is in position to deploy spirit to conquer desire. Spinoza departs from this account by denying that there is any faculty of spirit that reason can deploy independently of what we desire, since what we desire is already decided by the ideas we form of our object of desire.

Since whether we affirm or negate an idea depends completely on the idea itself, one could perhaps call ideas auto-affirming (or auto-denying). 91 This, however, is only true for adequate ideas. Spinoza would admit that something which phenomenally resembles suspension of judgment may arise vis-à-vis our inadequate ideas. That is, an inadequate idea may be confused to such a degree that there may be no ground for either affirming or negating it. For Spinoza,

---

90 Plato’s view(s) on the soul and its supposed tripartition is of course much more complex than I can do justice to in this chapter. For an attempt at reconciling the tripartition of the soul in the Republic with its simplicity in Phaedo, see Whiting (2012).
91 Leibniz was famously suspicious of this claim. For Leibniz, “Ideae non agunt Mens agunt”. For Leibniz’s relation to Spinoza on this matter, see the “useful caricature” provided by Laerke (2008, pp. 38-9).
therefore, any apparent suspension of judgment results from the fact that the idea which is neither affirmed nor negated is confused (2p49s).

Spinoza believes that truth is self-evident in the sense that no one can doubt whether she has a true and adequate idea. This is the case because, for Spinoza, truth is a sign of itself: what we clearly and distinctly perceive, we can certainly know to be true, and then there is no room for doubt (see 2p43s; 2d4). Before I proceed to comment on this, on the face of it utterly implausible, evidentiality of truth, I must briefly address the question of an apparent inconsistency.

In the passages just mentioned, Spinoza claims that in having true ideas, we are aware of having ideas. It may be thought that in claiming that self-reflexivity necessarily accompanies truth, Spinoza is committed to the view that there is, in addition to the complexes of ideas - i.e. minds, a self who can be aware of having true ideas. But this is not necessary. On Spinoza’s view, ideas are acts of cognition (and, sometimes, of volition). Why could they not also be acts of self-cognition? Because, the objection I foresee goes, there is in that case no reason why the mind - the overall complex - should itself be aware of each self-cognizing idea. But in being a complex idea, the mind is not only identical with the body of which it is a mind. In virtue of the parallelism that connects ideas of ideas with their content-ideas within the attribute of thought, it is also identical with the idea of the mind, with the idea of the idea (2p21s). The idea of the mind is an idea of the whole complex and thus a comprehensive idea of all individual acts of cognition and self-cognition that are its component ideas. Although this is not normally how we construe selfhood or personhood, it is not impossible for an idea of the mind to be of all the ideas that constitute the mind, and thereby also of the self-cognizing ideas that thus constitute the mind. But that idea of the mind is the mind, and so the reflexivity of that idea should belong to the mind, too. Although I have not yet discussed what explains the unification of complexes of ideas as minds (a topic I reserve for a future paper), it appears that minds can indeed be capable of self-reflection without there being any self over and above ideas. Let

---

92 This point has been argued by Koistinen (2009, p. 164).
me now return to the doctrine just discussed: that of the alleged evidentiality of truth.

That truth is evidential may seem to be an implausible thesis, to put it mildly. There is, in the contemporary logic of epistemology, a similar thesis, known as the KK-thesis. More specifically, the KK-thesis states that if one knows that p, then one knows that one knows that p. Of course, this is not literally what Spinoza says. Spinoza’s claim is rather that if one has a true idea, then one knows that it is true. But the similarity is nonetheless worth noting. It is widely acknowledged if one’s intention is to model how human beings actually reason, the KK-thesis must not be allowed to hold. As far as an account of human psychology goes, it is simply too optimistic. And, of course, the same applies to the Spinozist claim that truth is evidential. If truth is evidential, then, it seems, I can by sheer contemplation adjudicate, for any proposition p, whether it or its negation is true. First, I consider p. Then I consider not-p. Whichever yields the entirely internal “perception” of truth must be true. But clearly, human cognition does not operate like this at all. Although this is a most pressing problem for Spinozist theory of knowledge, it has been rather neglected in the scholarship. I cannot treat the implausibility of Spinozist view in further detail here.

93 See Girle (2000, ch. 12, sec. 4) for an introduction.
94 I thank Jamin Asay for helpful discussion on this issue.
95 The one coherent solution that has been proposed in the scholarship consists in claiming that, for Spinoza, at least some propositions, namely those we can know to be true, must lack negations. Then, whenever we think that we contemplate the negation of a necessarily true proposition, what we contemplate is not really a proposition. This solution has been elaborated by Pruss (2011, pp. 181-7). Error would, on Pruss’s “pragmatic” account of Spinoza, arise when we mistake things that are not propositions (or ideas) for propositions (or ideas). (Pruss allows for a certain glissement between Spinozist ideas and propositions that I will not take issue with presently.) Because, although Spinoza states that we are aware of having true ideas, he does not state that we are aware of having false ones. So, true propositions can be evidentially true if they do not have negations. Then either we can have an idea or believe in a true proposition and know it, or we can think that we have an idea believe a proposition and act as if we do, although in fact we do not have an idea or believe a proposition at all, or we can simply lack an idea or lack belief in a proposition, without also thinking that we do in fact have an idea or believe a proposition. Although I can come to know p and know that p is true when I know p, I cannot seriously contemplate non-p in order to adjudicate which is true. The problem with this solution is that it seems incompatible with Spinozist’s expressed view that there are or exist false ideas (or propositions). But closer examination of the texts reveals that the falsity of ideas consists exactly in lack of being: “Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, or mutilated and confused, ideas involve” (2p35). So per-
Another problem for Spinoza’s view is one of internal consistency. Above, I suggested that in order for knowledge and love of God to be eternal but yet not always occurrent, Spinoza needs to shield this eternal idea from the gaze of our conscious introspection. For Spinoza, I suggested, we have true and adequate latent ideas that are entertained by God. It seems that either Spinoza must grant that the idea of God is not eternally in us, or he must deny that we are always conscious of the truth of any true idea which we may have. The first option contradicts his explicit statement that we have this idea eternally; the second contradicts his theory that no one can be unaware of having a true idea when they do. The solution is probably to qualify Spinoza’s claim that we know our true ideas to be true. Plausibly, he could maintain that we know only our true and consciously entertained true ideas to be true. This solution invites a whole debate about the border between the conscious and the unconscious - for example, the question of what happens to the self-evidence of truth if this border is continuous - a debate that I for present purposes will have to set aside. I will proceed on the assumption that no one can be in suspense about having a true idea whenever she consciously entertains the true idea, but that she can fail to recognize the truth of her idea when she latently entertains the true idea in question, without exactly defining the limit which decides which ideas are consciously and which only latently entertained.96

It is in sum evident to all minds when their consciously entertained ideas are adequate/true (I will omit the qualification ‘consciously’ in what follows). One would, as a consequence, have to explain by appeal to an independent, free will, the negation of ideas adequately perceived to be true, or the affirmation of ideas adequately perceived to be false (or, indeed, suspension of judgment concerning

---

96 For a relevant discussion of the border between conscious and unconscious in Spinoza, see Garrett (2008).
the falsity/truth of an idea that is adequately perceived to be either). But Spinoza, famously, denies that there is a free will.

Spinoza’s rejection of a free will is predicated on two grounds, one ground being metaphysical, the other as it were methodological. First, the human will cannot be free since it belongs to the class of things that are always compelled \([\textit{coacta}: 1d7]\), i.e. modes. All volitions are therefore necessary causes, never free causes (1p32). Second, on Spinoza’s view, there is, in metaphysical rigor, neither any will over and above particular volitions, nor any intellect over and above singular ideas. Spinoza’s reason for disposing of faculties is motivated by a regard for a kind of parsimony that I previously (following Bennett) called \textit{minimalism}. On Spinoza’s view, our ‘will/desire’ and ‘intellect’ are simply the universal under which we subsume particular acts of thinking - ideas - or willing/desiring - volitions/appetites (cf. 2p48s). Neither will nor intellect enjoys any independent reality over and above individual acts of thinking.

This means that there is no higher order power by the means of which we could stratify our ideas and volitions. Whether or not we affirm a given idea is entirely due to the idea itself. If this appears counterintuitive, recall that Spinoza’s account does not render wonder or uncertainty impossible. It is when ideas are \textit{clear} that we are compelled to either affirm or negate them, and it may be surmised that ideas are rarely that clear to us. Ideas may be confused to such a degree that we cannot either affirm or negate them. However, Spinoza’s account does imply that we cannot suspend judgment on \textit{clear} ideas. (This may seem questionable: for instance, one might want to think that one has two sufficiently clear ideas about two alternative and mutually exclusive future events. Yet one does not affirm or negate either, perhaps because the outcome will be decided by chance. In Spinoza’s universe, however, causation is not probabilistic, but wholly deterministic, and so he would not be impressed by this particular counterexample.)

There is something all ideas are about, for Spinoza (see 2a3). Whether or not we affirm an idea therefore depends entirely on how we conceive of the object the idea in question intends - and, it may be added, on whether this idea is entertained
in the conscious mode. Once we adequately and consciously conceive of something, we have no choice but to affirm that idea. It follows that once we adequately and consciously conceive of a most perfect being, we have no choice but to affirm this idea.  

3.4. Consequences for Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection.

First, if an adequate idea only intended its object, but did not involve the reality of the object it intended, having ideas would not enrich the ontological perfection, or reality, of minds. But above, in 3.1, I suggested that for Spinoza, the formal reality of the thing, and the objective reality in the idea of that thing, are one and the same. Hence, it is necessary for a thing to communicate its perfection/reality to a mind which has an idea of that thing. By this I mean the following. The perfection the mind that has an adequate idea intends, is not merely a “representation” of the perfection the thing enjoys: it is the very perfection of the thing itself, but as expressed under the attribute of thought. Since perfection unfolds in the same way in the formal and in the objective order, the perfection of the things is the very same perfection as the perfection of the ideas of these things. If minds are perfected by means of the perfection of the ideas that are in them, it follows that minds “participate” in the perfection of their objects of their ideas.

If having a conscious and adequate idea of something did not in itself imply that one affirmed or negated that thing - if, that is, suspension of judgment were genuinely possible, as it would be if the will extended beyond the intellect - one

---

97 Lest the thesis that adequate ideas as it were affirmed themselves may seem too optimistic, it should be stressed that the human mind is a complex idea (see 2p15). The ideas that collectively constitute the human mind are, however, not equally strong; they are differentiated in terms of their force. In each mind there obtains a distinct hierarchy of force among its constituent ideas. Ideas are allotted positions in the hierarchy, not on the basis of their relative adequacy, but on the basis of their relative force (4p7). Only an adequate idea which is accompanied by the greatest force, would ascend to the highest position in the hierarchy. The hierarchy, in turn, presumably determines which ideas come to dominate the thinking and acting of the complex whole, and which remain relatively powerless. Although I cannot explore this idea further here, it seems to me plausible that the threshold between conscious and subconscious is to be based on the forcefulness of the ideas in question. In subsequent chapters, I discuss how, on Spinoza’s view, the idea of God can (at least momentarily) be invested with supreme force (Chapters 6 and 8).
could have an adequate idea of a most real thing without affirming this idea. But since, as I showed in 3.2, affirmation and negation follow automatically upon adequate ideas, an adequate idea is automatically affirmed whenever it is conscious. Hence, it is necessary for an adequately perceived idea of a most perfect thing to communicate its perfection/reality to a mind which has a conscious idea of that thing. For the mind that entertains the idea has no free will whereby it could (for instance) suspend judgment vis-à-vis the idea of God it adequately perceives as true.

The sameness of formal and objective reality/perfection explains why God’s very perfection is in the idea of God. This explains why merely having this idea can perfect a mind, and answers the puzzle raised at the onset of this paper, i.e. why knowledge of God constitutes our highest possible perfection/reality. Of course, that the idea of God involves reality/perfection to the highest degree explains why it is this idea, and no other, that can make the minds that intend it partake in maximal perfection. The fact that there is no will that moves independently of an idea explains why merely having conscious knowledge of God necessarily perfects a mind. Once God is adequately conceived, the idea necessarily affirms its object. The perfection that such conscious knowledge of God involves is speculative. For by speculative perfection I mean consciously recognized ontological perfection.

On this reading, Spinoza’s account of human perfection is intimately linked with his highly original treatment of what ideas are. One notable advantage of this reading is that it highlights the ethical (and soteriological) advantage Spinoza reaps by asserting that ideas are in themselves volitional. The notion of volitional ideas effectively dispenses with the notion of a free will, because there is no need for a will to affirm or negate what ideas themselves already affirm or negate. Although Spinoza himself emphasized the practical benefits he thought accrued to his abolition of free will by the means of the notion of volitional ideas (see e.g. in 2p49s), the ethical or soteriological dimension of this abolition have not always received the attention it deserves in the secondary literature. By showing that Spinoza’s volitional theory of ideas plays an important role in account of how
human beings are perfected, I have been able to illustrate part of the practical significance of that doctrine.

It should be acknowledged, however, that my reading is not without difficulties. One major difficulty is that Spinoza’s philosophy of human perfection appears to bifurcate once more. In previous chapters, a clear-cut distinction was drawn between teleological and ontological perfection. But it appears that for Spinoza, there is one perfection we inevitably possess - namely the one we possess merely in virtue of having an adequate idea of God (something which we all do, see 2p47) -, on the one hand, and one perfection which we do not always possess - namely the perfection of consciously entertaining that idea of God. It is important to stress that we have an adequate idea of God whether we are aware of it or not. In a way, our minds are therefore perfected whether we know it or not. Human perfection thus bifurcates into the perfection we possess whether we recognize it or not (which, from the cognitive point of view, corresponds to the presence in our mind of an idea adequately intending God) and the perfection we have when we recognize the perfection we inevitably possess. As already mentioned, I call the latter kind of perfection speculative.

3.5. Response to Jarrett.

According to Jarrett’s view, Spinoza’s meta-ethics is constructivist since his ideal of human perfection is constructed. I disagree.

Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is meant to be realistic. For it is grounded in the perfection of God. Spinoza himself does not doubt the reality of God and, since the ideal human perfection consists in maximally acknowledging this reality intellectually, this ideal is not constructed, but based on the very cornerstone of Spinoza’s theology: God’s absolute infinity and supreme perfection. This piece of theology is also a cornerstone in Spinoza’s conceptual edifice of human perfection.

One result of Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is that the maximum of human perfection that one can attain is proportional to the perfection that one can
conceive. Hence, if one were to regard Spinoza as an opportunistic moral philosopher - one desperate to defend at all costs a possibility for humans to perfect themselves -, then Spinoza, in order to safeguard the possibility of human perfection, would be (as it were) obliged to “construct” a maximally real being. If God’s necessary existence is neither self-evident nor demonstrable, then Spinoza’s ethics is constructivist, not because the ideal of human perfection is constructed in the absence of a solid ontological foundation, but because (arguably) its foundation, that is, God’s existence, would then be constructed to postulate that there is maximal perfection at all. For if there were no maximum of perfection to conceive, his ideal of human perfection would crumble. It should be noted that I do not suggest that Spinoza considered himself to have constructed a maximally real being - he would find this reading most perverse. However, if one denies the certainty Spinoza himself attributes to our knowledge of God, one may well consider God as constructed, and in fact constructed in such a way as to enable humans to gain a maximum of perfection through their knowledge of what is most perfect. In this sense only, Spinoza’s philosophy of human perfection could be considered constructivist.

Conclusion.

In previous chapters I suggested that if Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is ontological, it is beyond good and evil, and beyond our standards of teleological perfection. In this chapter I showed that Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is indeed ontological and that it is ontological because it is contemplative or intellectual. To recapitulate my reasoning: the identity of objective and formal reality is what makes it necessary for one to share in the perfection of the thing of which one possesses an adequate idea. This feature of ideas is exactly what makes it the case that an idea of something perfect must communicate its ontological perfection to the mind that entertains the idea. The doctrine that adequate ideas are volitions make it necessary to affirm the idea in question and explains why consciously entertaining an idea of a supremely perfect thing necessarily maximizes the speculative perfection of a mind.
Even though all minds are ontologically perfect in virtue of always possessing an idea of God, they are not all aware of this idea, or accordingly, of their own perfection: they are not all speculatively perfect. So, the question remains why not all minds are aware of being perfect in the way I have described. Indeed, in Spinoza’s view, everyone has adequate, and it would seem, conscious, knowledge of God (2p47). So, it seems that all humans, without exception, must know and as a consequence ultimately love God, and thereby be aware of having reached the nec plus ultra of human perfection. I will return to this difficulty in Chapter 7. But before I do so, it is necessary to investigate Spinoza’s modal thinking in some more detail. For as we saw in previous chapters, necessity and perfection are for Spinoza intimately connected notions and so we cannot hope to fully understand Spinoza’s philosophy of perfection unless we have some grasp of his modal thinking. The subsequent chapter is devoted to this task.
Chapter 4

Infinity and Contingency

Introduction.

In subsequent chapters I will show how Spinoza’s modal metaphysics connects with his idea of philosophical self-cultivation (Chapter 6) and finally, with his ethics of perfectionism at large (Chapter 8). This chapter is devoted to the topic of Spinoza’s modal metaphysics as such.

Spinoza’s own words seem to commit him to necessitarianism. There is textual evidence for attributing this view to Spinoza. Nonetheless, necessitarianism is a difficult position to defend. For this reason, arguments have been made to make room for contingency in his system. The two strongest arguments of this kind are Curley (1969), restated in Curley and Walski (1999), and Newlands (2010). Both these arguments appeal to Spinoza’s claim that all finite things are locked in an infinite nexus of causal relations obtaining between finite things (1p28). The question central to this paper is whether metaphysical contingency can, as these commentators claim, be derived from an infinity of causal ancestors.

The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, I aim to present an alternative reading of the relation between infinity and Spinoza’s concept of contingency. On the reading I advance, while the infinity of the causal ancestry of finite things does not ground any objective metaphysical contingency on their part, it is one necessary condition which must obtain if they are to appear as contingent. The other necessary condition is that things must be conceivable as possibly having not existed. Only the concepts of things that do not owe their existence to their natures can be conceived of as non-instantiated. So only such things can be thought of as possibly having not existed. In order to distinguish this property from its purely modal counterpart, I will call it Spinoza-contingency.

There are in the secondary literature several lists of passages that motivate ascribing necessitarianism to Spinoza. Garrett (1991) and Griffin (2008) both marshal textual evidence in favour of the view. Koistinen (2003) proposes a reconstruction of Spinoza’s argument.
henceforward *S-contingency*. Jointly, infinity and *S*-contingency explain why finite things can appear contingent.

This reading, however, is only plausible if Spinoza is not a contingentist. In what remains of the paper, I must therefore challenge the strongest derivations of contingency from infinity in the literature. My second goal accordingly breaks down into two subgoals. First, I must indicate why Curley’s original proposal fails. And last, I must argue that, contrary to what Newlands suggests, the conceivability of things as contingent does not contribute any (ontological) perfection to the world.

Before presenting the actual heart of the paper, however, it is necessary to first provide the background picture.

1. **Background: the modality of the finite modes.**

According to Spinoza, there is one necessarily existing substance (1p7; cf. 1d8): God, or Nature. Spinoza’s demonstration of 1p7 indicates that, on his view, the substance exists since because it is self-caused. A thing is self-caused when its essence involves existence. To cite the opening definition of the *Ethics*: “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves [involvit] existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.” The concept of an existence-involving essence has an impressive pedigree in the history of philosophy. But what does it mean?

The statement that ‘The essence of x involves existence’ is naturally read as meaning that it belongs to the essence of x that it should exist; that existence is a feature that x has essentially. We can provisorily understand *essence* minimally, as the identity conditions of a thing: all the features a thing must have in order to exist as itself.

As Bennett (1984, p 71; 2001, 123) has pointed out, this appears to cause trouble for Spinoza. Because, when involvement is thus understood, this leaves Spinoza’s reasoning open to the objection that the essences of finite things, too, actually “involve” existence. Regardless of whether they are self-caused or not, things exist essentially in all worlds where they exist. For, evidently, any thing whatsoever must exist if it is to be able to exist as itself. But, on Spinoza’s
view, the essences of things that are not self-caused do not involve existence (see 1p24). For this reason, if we are charitable, we are not to think that by claiming that the substance’s essence involves existence, Spinoza meant that the substance needs to exist if it is to exist as itself.

Instead, Spinoza presumably meant that the substance’s essence involves existence since the substance exists necessarily in virtue of having the essence it has. This has the following implications. Although we can conclude for any thing no matter its essence that it exists essentially in any worlds where it does exist, Spinoza’s claim, anachronistically phrased in the terms of possible worlds semantics that Bennett deploys against him, would be that finite things are such that their existence in any world can’t be established by attending to their essences alone. If one doesn’t know whether x exists in any world, then x’s essential definition won’t offer us any help in this regard, unless the x in question is God.

This understanding raises a difficult question. What does it mean to exist necessarily because of one’s essence? In Spinozism, things that exist necessarily by reason of their essence do so since their essences are necessary and their existence is the same as their essence (1p20). Divine simplicity and internal necessitation are therefore intimately connected. I cannot here engage directly with the problem of divine simplicity.

However, it is to be noted that Spinoza treats the existence that is identical with the essence of the thing in question under the rubric of eternity (1d8). Spinoza’s “existentialist” understanding of eternity is important. It is customarily assumed that we can prefix modal operators to propositions without being committed to any existence: the modal operator does not carry existential import. Thus, it is impossible that there be a square circle but (on non-Meinongian views, at least) this modal characteristic is not a property possessed by that (necessarily non-existing) circle. By contrast, according to 1d8, only existing necessary things can be eternal. And since Spinoza’s ethical project is to transform the human mind by making it pay attention to things that really exist, rather than to the phantoms of its imagination, it should come as no surprise that he will generally be occupied with this ontologically committed kind of necessity. Since he is more occupied with things that actually exist and
their modal characteristics, it follows that Spinoza is more interested in what
we today call de re modality than in the modality of truth-bearers. 99 This
preference of Spinoza’s will prove significant later.

Following (1p16) or as Spinoza would also put it, flowing from the divine
nature (see 1p17s, G. II/62: effluxisse), there are modes. Unlike the divine
nature, modes, Spinoza maintains, are not caused by themselves, and
accordingly, they do not have an essence which involves existence (1p24).
Spinoza provides us with an armchair experiment that we can undertake to test
which things fall into this category. Whenever something “can be conceived as
not existing”, Spinoza maintains, that thing’s “essence does not involve
existence” (1a7) and hence no such a thing can claim absolute necessity. (I will
return to the link between conceivability and alethic modality below.)

Modes come in two classes: infinite and finite. The set of infinite modes
divides into two subsets: immediate and mediate infinite modes. Spinoza is
notoriously secretive about the infinite modes. As examples of immediate
infinite modes of thought he gives “absolutely infinite intellect”, and “motion
and rest” of extension. As an example of a mediate infinite mode he gives “the
face of the whole universe” of extension, without providing an example for
thought (see Letter 64, C II. 439). 100

While often interpreted as laws of nature (e.g., Curley 1969, 66-74; Bennett
2001, 171) the exact status of the infinite modes is widely debated in the
literature. I cannot enter this debate here: suffice it to note that whether they are
immediate or mediate, Spinoza considers infinite modes as following directly
from the absolute nature of God’s attributes, and for this reason, they are
eternal. And because of the modal force Spinoza invests in eternity, this can be
rephrased in modal terms: the infinite modes are necessary since God is
necessary (see 1p21; 1p23). In this regard, Spinoza’s logic of modal entailment

99 This has previously been highlighted by Mason (1997).
100 However, as Bennett (2001, 171) has pointed out, Spinoza’s identification
of the mediate infinite mode of extension, in combination with parallelism,
makes the corresponding mediate infinite mode in thought easy to identify: it
should be the idea of the face of the whole universe.
is clear. It can be summarized as follows: something that follows from something necessary is itself necessary.¹⁰¹

This chapter will be exclusively concerned with the modal status of the finite modes. Unlike the infinite modes, finite modes are not determined exclusively by God and what follows from God “absolutely”. Instead, a finite mode is determined, on the one hand, by divine immanent causation and on the other hand, by the transitive causation exerted upon finite modes by other finite modes. Let us recapitulate what these terms mean (Spinoza first introduces the distinction in KV, C. 76; in the Ethics, it is introduced in 1p18). For a mode to be causally determined or produced by an immanent cause means that it is caused by something that it inheres in. For example, since a blush inheses in a body and is also at least partially caused to occur by that body, a blush is at least partially immanently caused by the body it occurs on. Since, on Spinoza’s view, things inhere in God (1p15), God is their immanent cause.

By contrast, transitive causation occurs when things are caused by things that they do not inhere in. This kind of causation is not very controversial, but Spinoza adds a twist to it. On his view, any transitively caused effect is caused by an actually infinite causal chain.

Spinoza first presents this wild claim in 1p28:

Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect, unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence [...] and so on, to infinity.

In this proposition, Spinoza asserts that transitive causation extends infinitely a parte ante, so that any finite mode necessarily has an infinity of causal

¹⁰¹ This dovetails with the widespread belief that if \( p \) entails \( q \) and \( p \) are both necessary, then \( q \) is necessary, too. That is syntactically valid in the weakest of standard modal logics, K. Nonetheless, many interpreters have been justly puzzled by this claim: how can a mode, which is not self-caused (1d2), be eternal, when eternity is defined (1d8) as the existing of that whose essence involves existence, and hence, by definition again (1d1), is self-caused?
antecedents. While the infinite modes are determined only as it were vertically by God’s immanent causation, finite modes are determined horizontally as well as vertically, by their finite peers as well as by the infinite God they inhere in.

Does this construal of the causation of finite things, as being both immanent and transitive, result in any noteworthy consequences for the modality of these things? Can we derive objective contingency from the infinite causal regress of finite peers extending behind any finite mode? (I understand by objectively contingent things that subclass of possible things which are not necessary.)

Before we look at the two main derivations of objective contingency from infinity that have been proposed in the secondary literature, let me first present how infinity and contingency are related on my alternative reading of Spinoza.

4.2. Infinity and contingency in a necessitarian world.

4.2.1. Different Spinozist senses of contingency.

On my reading of Spinoza, the infinite ancestry of finite things does not ground the objective contingency of these things. It does however help ground their subjective contingency. Let me first define the different senses of contingency involved.

There is first the objective modal property existing things would have if they could have been otherwise. Spinoza bans such contingency entirely from reality in 1p29. This proposition reads: “In nature, there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.”

This ban, however, does not rule out our capacity for conceiving of things as contingent. As Spinoza clarifies in 1p33s:

[A] thing is called contingent because of a defect of our knowledge. For if we do not know that the thing’s essence involves a contradiction, or if we do know very well that its essence does not involve a contradiction, and nevertheless can affirm nothing certainly about its existence,
because the order of causes is hidden from us, it can never seem to us either necessary or impossible. So, we call it contingent […] 102

On Spinoza’s view, no matter how much we consider finite things in isolation, we cannot get sufficient purchase on their modal profiles in order to establish their necessity. But why is this? More clearly put, the question is: why is it that attending to the essences of finite things will never allow us to establish their necessary existence?

The reason why is quite straightforward. On Spinoza’s view, and I cite him: “the essence of the things produced by God does not involve existence” (1p24, cf. the foundational definitions 1d1-1d8). In a subsequent definition, Spinoza even proposes to call this feature of things their contingency, reserving the property of possibly having been otherwise for the word ‘posibility’ (4d4). He says: “I call singular things contingent insofar as we find nothing, when we attend only to their essence, which necessarily posits their existence or which necessarily excludes it” (4d3). It is important to stress that such “contingent” things are still necessary. One would perhaps want to call the property that Spinoza speaks of in 4d3 a kind of extrinsic necessity, for he speaks of it as the absence of an intrinsic cause for the necessity of the thing (the intrinsic cause would be the very nature of the thing). But nonetheless, to call necessity what Spinoza (if only occasionally) calls contingency would only risk obscuring matters.

For the sake of clarity, let us instead call such things S-contingent. The ontological reason why things are S-contingent is that they are composed of essence and existence, that essence and existence are not “one” in them, as they are in God (1p20). If something is S-contingent, then we can, as a consequence, think of its essence as either instantiated or non-instantiated.

Whereas the contingency we attribute to things on account of our ignorance of how they are necessitated fails to carve the world at its joints, S-contingency does seem to carve the world exactly at the joint which distinguishes God from the rest of us. For this reason, S-contingency is not merely epistemic. In other

102 The claim that such predications of contingency are entirely due to ignorance recurs in 2p31c and 2p44c1.
words, it is not merely a question of finite things being “for all we know, possible”. Our ignorance of the fact that they are necessitated does reveal something about them, although that something is not that they exist otherwise than necessarily. In spite of itself not being a merely subjective property, S-contingency does nonetheless help ground the merely subjective contingency of things, because we can think of things as possibly not having existed only when we can think of their natures as not necessarily instantiated.

I have differentiated between objective contingency and S-contingency. 

*Objective contingency* is the objective modal property things would have if they could have been otherwise and *S-contingency* the objective metaphysical property things have if their existence is not necessitated by their natures. Neither property is the same as the merely subjective and relational contingency things have when it appears to us that they could have been otherwise. Nonetheless, for Spinoza only *S-contingent things can appear contingent*. For Spinoza believes that it is not possible to conceive of existence-involving-essences as not instantiated. One may wish to object to this claim. Surely, I *can* think of God as contingently existing? For example, say I think of God as existing because he was born by the sea. Spinoza would object that what I think about when I thus conceive God is God at all. If I think about something that does not owe its existence to its essence, I may use the name ‘God’ to refer to that thing, but what I am thinking of is not really God at all.

As already indicated, S-contingency stands in a relation to conceivability different from that of objective contingency. To be precise, conceivability tracks S-contingency: “If a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence” (1a7), Spinoza writes in an axiom.

By a short foray into Spinoza’s mereology of substance, I will back up my claim that although conceivability tracks S-contingency, it does not track objective contingency.

On Spinoza’s view, any attribute of God is infinite and indivisible (see 1p12). One argument Spinoza advances for the indivisibility of extension is particularly interesting in this context. It reads:
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 that there is no vacuum? 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 […]
but all its parts must so concur that there is no vacuum, it follows also
that they cannot be really distinguished, i.e., that corporeal substance,
insofar as it is a substance, cannot be divided (1p15s).

The basic claim of the cited passage appears to be that only the absence of any
real distinction in corporeal substance can explain that there can never be any
vacuum. What Spinoza considered an a priori truth - namely: the absence of a
vacuum - is only explainable by reference to another (perhaps less well-known)
a priori truth - namely: the absence of real distinctions in nature.\(^\text{103}\) This is, of
course, all skeletal: Bennett (1984, p 98-9) provides a more detailed comment
on what a vacuum would be which explains why the truth is a priori.

But it is abundantly clear from the cited passage that the concept of a real
distinction is modal in character: for A and B to be really distinct, it must be
possible for them to exist independently of each other. The indivisibility of
extension stands and falls with the impossibility of real distinctions in nature.
And things can only be really distinguished if their co-existence is contingent.
Although we can conceive of substance as divisible and of modes of substance
as contingent this does not track any real divisibility on the part of the
substance nor any real contingency on the part of its modes. But why should
we have this ability to misconstrue substance and modes?

Spinoza provides a psychological answer to this question. More precisely, he
maintains that our propensity for conceiving of substance as divisible, and
accordingly, of modes of substance as contingent, stems from our imagination
(1p15s[V]; Letter 12, C. 201). For Spinoza the imagination is contrasted with
reason.\(^\text{104}\) Let us understand reason as well as the imagination minimally:

\(^{103}\) Peterman (2015) discusses what this implies for Spinoza’s understanding
of extension.

\(^{104}\) This is not the place to clarify to what extent Spinoza, by embracing this
difference relapses into a kind of ‘moralized’ faculty psychology. For a criti-
cism of this psychology, see Williams (1992).
reason as the sum total of all our adequate ideas and the imagination as the sum total of all our inadequate ideas. Although the issue is rather complex, it is clear, at least, that the imagination is the sole source of error. Or, more accurately, error arises when inadequate ideas of things based on how they appear are not counterbalanced by adequate ideas which show in which respect our perception is misguided. In Spinoza’s parlance, images, i.e. affectations of the body which present things as present to us, lead us to err when they are not counterbalanced by any adequate idea “that excludes the existence of those things that [our Mind] imagines to be present to it” (2p17s II/106; see also 4p1s; 2p16c). To reuse Spinoza’s example (see 4p1s), we are not mistaken in perceiving the sun as being relatively close to the earth. We are only at fault if we lack the corrective (and occurrent) idea of its actual distance. I cannot here comment on whether this is a sensible account of error. Crucial for my present purposes is that Spinoza claims that “it depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent” (2p44c1: Emphasis added). This shows that we consider things contingent when they appear in this way to us and when we lack a corrective idea which establishes their necessity. Whereas the adequate idea of the sun’s true distance from the earth can be obtained from the science of astronomy, Spinoza presumably thought that the adequate idea which establishes things as necessary could be obtained through the study of metaphysics.

The conceivability of contingency of things vis-à-vis each other does not prove that these things could genuinely have been separated. Nonetheless, that is how things appear. Objective contingency is, on Spinoza’s view, an imaginary property: a property that exists in and through the imagination alone. This does not mean that it is a property the appearance of which can easily be annihilated. Just as the sun continues to appear to be relatively close to us even after we are taught its actual distance from the earth, so things will perhaps always continue to appear contingent even after we learn that they are necessitated. Yet, Spinoza thinks that the conceivability of a nature as possibly not instantiated does indeed track some kind of objective property. To conceive of a nature as not-instantiated is an armchair experiment we can undertake in order to test whether the thing is S-contingent, and when thought of in isolation, S-
contingent things can be falsely construed as objectively contingent. In short, conceivability as contingent tracks the ontological composition of things that are not necessitated by their natures, not any objective contingency on their part.

4.2.2. Discussion: infinity as grounding the appearance of contingency.

With these distinctions in place, I can now suggest that finite modes appear contingent to us for two reasons. The first root of our erroneous judgments attributing objective contingency to things is the S-contingency of these things. The second root is the infinity of the causal ancestry of all finite modes.

If something owed its existence to its essence, that thing could not appear as contingent. But since only God, who is infinite, owes its existence to its essence, no finite things can so appear. Indeed, since we can conceive of things as possibly having not existed, it is clear we do not always posit their natures as necessarily instantiated. Since we can conceive of finite modes as possibly having not existed, they must be S-contingent. Yet, S-contingency is not enough for an appearance of contingency to arise.

Consider once more that, on Spinoza’s view, the buck-passing of relative necessity does not go in a circle. It regresses backwards to infinity (1p28). If there were not an infinite series of causal ancestors, the first lender of relative necessity would not be relatively necessary at all, because there could be no prior thing to which it could owe its necessity. In order to be necessary, it would have to be absolutely necessary, and all things owing their necessity to it, would become necessary in the same evident way. Let us grant Spinoza that the universal causal order isn’t circular. Then, even if we could not arrive at the necessity of finite modes by analyzing their essences, if there were only a finite number of modes in the world, the derivation of their necessity from their causal ancestors would at least be humanely feasible.

By introducing an infinite regress of causal ancestors between modes and their necessitating ground, Spinoza guarantees that we cannot perceive the necessity which these things nonetheless possess, by attending to their causes. By allowing for finite modes to be S-contingent he ensures that we also cannot spot their necessity by analyzing them. Metaphysically speaking, there is a
necessity by which finite things operate. But, for as long as we attend only to the finite things themselves, we are as it were blind to this necessity. We cannot establish it \textit{a posteriori} by exploring chains of causes. Nor can we establish it \textit{a priori} by analyzing essences. The necessity of things is obscured by two bridal veils: their S-contingency and the infinite causal ancestry of things. Arguably, Spinoza’s veiling move is empirically motivated: his goal is to square the necessitarian demands of his system with the undeniably contingent appearance of the things of our lived experience. If we can establish the necessity of things neither by studying them \textit{a priori} nor \textit{a posteriori}, one may be inclined to think that there is no way to establish their necessity at all. This is not so however. We can realize the necessity of things not by paying attention to them but to God as their necessitating ground, a cognition which Spinoza calls the \textit{third kind of knowledge}.

To sum up my reading, it is because singular things are both S-contingent and generated by an infinite succession of causes that they, on their own, don’t provide the information that allows us to “see” their necessity. This interpretation is, however, only plausible if Spinoza does not admit genuine contingency into the picture. But it has been argued that he is committed to contingentism, and that this commitment arises exactly because of his commitment to an infinite causal regress in 1p28. Allow me to address these arguments in what follows.

\textit{4.3. Challenging the derivation of contingency from infinity.}

\textit{4.3.1. Against the suggestion that the infinity of causal ancestors grounds the contingency of singular things.}

Curley (1969, p 101-104) and Curley and Walski (1999, 244 n. 7; 253) have asserted that from Spinoza’s understanding of the finite modes as co-determined by, on the one hand, the divine nature and the infinite modes and on the other hand, their own finite peers, genuine contingency follows. The general idea seems to be shared by other commentators. As for instance Bennett (1984, p 74-75) puts it, on the basis of 1p28, finite modes appear to be “inevitable” given the history of the universe, but not necessary in the sense that they could not have been otherwise.
In what follows, I will focus on the first-mentioned version of Curley’s argument. This is because Curley and Walski too appeal to his original reasoning in their later paper as well, without fully stating the argument. It seems to me that Curley’s argument has four basic assumptions. (It should be noted that this list of assumptions is my own.)

(a) Curley treats truths or the facts the truths are about as the only bearers of the only kind of modality he will discuss.\(^{105}\)

(b) There are two different kinds of necessity in Spinoza’s system, absolute necessity and relative necessity. The truth value of absolutely necessary propositions cannot vary across worlds. These are truths about God’s nature as it is absolutely (and what follows from it as it is absolutely). Relatively necessary truths are about finite modes. The finite modes are what they are in part because of God’s immanent causation. (Curley construes this causation as conformity to laws of nature: I will not here address Curley’s nomological interpretation of attributes and infinite modes.) So, truths about them obtain in part because some absolutely necessary truths obtain. But because of Spinoza’s view that all transitive causation regresses infinitely, relatively necessary truths are also conditioned by other relatively necessary truths about other modes. All relatively necessary truths are conditioned by some absolutely necessary truth about God’s nature as well as by some relatively necessary truth about a finite mode.

(c) Possible worlds can be formalized as sets of truths.

(d) If the set of truths representing the actual world is the only self-consistent set, then the actual world is the only possible one.

On the assumption that there are relatively necessary truths in the first place (b), can one proceed to show that these truths are contingent from an absolute perspective? Curley claims that one can, if these truths regress infinitely. So, he proceeds to derive contingency from infinity as follows.

\(^{105}\) This is not to deny that for Curley things that are not truth-bearers may nonetheless possess modal characteristics (although he does not discuss these). But it is nonetheless, as we shall see, an important interpretative choice.
Truths which are absolutely necessary could not have been otherwise, and so none of the sets in which these truths are negated represent possible worlds. As for relatively necessary truths, these are true relative to the truth of a conjunction. The conjuncts are (i) some absolutely necessary truth and (ii) some relatively necessary truth. Of course, (i) cannot be negated; (ii) however, can - if the relative truth in the conjunction which necessitates it, can be negated, and so on, to infinity. Thus, the set that can be constructed by successively negating relatively necessary truths would be self-consistent. Let us call the self-consistent set of truths that results when all relatively necessary conjuncts are negated the *anti-world*. To return to the realm of Spinoza interpretation, the consequence of the constructibility of the anti-world would be that because Spinoza embraced a view like the one expressed in 1p28, his philosophy is not necessitarian.

In this chapter, (a) will be the basis on which I will challenge Curley's argument.

Whereas Curley construes members of the set that make up possible worlds as facts true about the worlds in question, Spinoza prefers to speak of the necessity of *things* (*res*). Why does he do that? Things owe their necessary existence to their causes, and they owe it to themselves, if they are self-caused. But for Spinoza, as for most of his medieval predecessors, the causal relation whereby things are produced or created always relates concretely existing things. Differently put, the *relata* of the causal relation whereby relatively necessarily things are produced are concretely existing things. Spinoza’s preference for things as modality bearers, and as the only *relata* in necessitating causal relations, might not have received the attention it merits in the scholarship.

Curley justifies his move in the following words: “Lacking the convenient term ‘fact’ to serve as an ontological correlate to the term “truth”, [Spinoza] had to

---

106 The view that absences as such are not causally efficacious is summarized in the once popular slogan *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Spinoza endorsed this view. See for instance the KV, C. 67.

107 For example, Lin (2007, 276) construes the relata of the causal relation as events, not as things.
make do with the inconvenient term 'thing’’ (1969, 89). However, although ‘fact’ and ‘truth’ may be more convenient for the purposes of discussing Spinoza’s modal thinking in contemporary terms, the translation from ‘thing’ to ‘fact’ is not ontologically innocent. For by substituting things for truths, Curley - arguably - abandons Spinoza’s ontological concept of necessity for a strictly logical one. Let me illustrate more precisely what I mean by this.

If facts are the convenient ontological correlatives of truths, then if it is true that a thing t exists, then that t exists is a fact, and likewise, if it does not exist, it is a fact that it does not exist. The consequence of this is that when Curley negates truths/facts in order to construct the anti-world what he would obtain if he could finish negating could in theory contain as much reality as our world. For there is nothing that says that by negating truths/facts you end up with lesser reality.

Spinoza, however, speaks of the modality of things (res). If what you negate are things, then, arguably, you will eventually end up with less reality (realitas) than you started off with. Before I discuss the importance of this result more in detail, it is worth noting why ending up with less reality than one started off with would be presumably be problematic for Spinoza. That is, allow me to briefly address the question why a world which, if it were actual, would contain less reality than our world, cannot be a genuine rival to this world.

On a plausible reading the important proposition 1p16 legislates that the divine nature be maximally and indeed infinitely creative. 1p16 reads: “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, (i.e. everything which can fall under an infinite intellect” (Emphasis added). Clearly, 1p16 is an attempt at deriving from the

---

108 It may be noted that although Curley treats facts as the ontological correlates of truths and as something that must obtain whenever there are truths, he does not show how they are the ontological grounds of truths.

109 Curley’s move reflects a contemporary preference. For instance, it is because we can talk of ‘negative facts’ with greater convenience than about ‘negative events’ (and even less ‘negative things’) that Mellor (2004) proposes to construe causes and effects as facts, rather than as events.

110 This reading is subscribed to by, for instance, Garrett (1991), Newlands (2010; 2017), and Steinberg (1981).
divine nature (whose definition - 1d6 - figures in the demonstration) an infinity of real things.\footnote{According to previous commentators, Spinoza by ‘infinite’ either did not mean ‘innumerable’ (Wolf 1926, 26) or does not have to be taken as meaning ‘innumerable’ since nothing in his system hinges on this (Bennett 1984, 75). Instead, according to these commentators, Spinoza by ‘infinite attributes’ simply meant ‘all attributes’ In contrast, Melamed (most recently in 2018) has argued that in speaking of ‘infinite attributes’, Spinoza mean to denote an infinite, and not a finite, totality, of attributes. Similarly, when Spinoza speaks of infinite modes in 1p16 and 1p17s, I understand him to mean an actually infinite totality of modes.} We can call this view - that the divine essence is such that it must bring forth an infinite totality of finite things - \textit{Plenitude}. Moreover, since the necessity by which Plenitude holds pertains to the divine nature it is clearly of the absolute kind. In other words, the world is plenary because of what God is absolutely, and not insofar because of the way God is modified by some finite mode.

If we stick with \textit{de re} modality, the anti-world (the set of things constructible by successive negation of the relatively necessary conjuncts necessitating the relatively necessary things in question) would lack things contained in the actual set of things. It would thus fail to comprise the totality of things in this world.

In order for Spinoza to be committed to genuine contingency, a possible world must not only be formally constructible but also possible given the content of the truths - or as I prefer, the nature of the things - which are absolutely necessary. God, of course, is the intrinsically necessary thing \textit{par excellence}.

So, let us ask ourselves the question whether Curley’s anti-world, \textit{when seen as comprising propositions positing things as existing/real}, could have been actual, given what Spinoza takes God to be. If we take seriously the demand for Plenitude on the part of the divine nature this seems to rule out the possibility of an anti-world, comprising only the negation of modes, but never anything positive (never any ‘reality’) to replace them with. For if we take seriously this demand, then the world is actual in part because it is plenary in the sense of containing all things. And this world could have comprised less-
than-all things to the same extent that God’s nature could have been different: that is, less creative or less plenary.\textsuperscript{112}

This is not to deny that when Curley construes worlds as sets of truths or facts (see (a) above), either absolutely necessary or necessary in relation to other truths or facts, the possible world that he would obtain by successively negating the relatively necessary truths or facts in the conjunctions necessitating other relatively necessary truths or facts, could at least in principle contain as much reality as the actual world. In other words, Curley’s anti-world could, if truths are the bearers of modality, contain as much reality as the actual world.

Yet, if if we stick with the Spinozist description, then each relatively necessary conjunct is not just any truth or fact, but a truth positing some thing as existing. For real things are, on Spinoza’s view, ultimately the bearers and the transmitters of necessity: any necessary thing owes its necessity to some thing, be it to another thing or to itself. Moreover, existing things, as Spinoza makes clear in 1p28, owe their relative necessity to other finitely existing things. If every relatively necessary conjunct posits something as existing, then whenever we negate such a conjunct, we remove some thing from the world, and hereby we also amputate some reality from the world. So, each truth to be negated is one positing a concretely existing thing causing another similarly existing thing.

\textsuperscript{112} Koistinen anticipates an exegetical objection to my move, saying that: “perfection, rather than being a premise in an argument for necessitarianism, is a consequence of necessitarianism” (2003, p 294-5). I would like to make two responses to this potential objection. First, I am not here making an argument for necessitarianism, only questioning one specific argument for contingentism. Second, Koistinen (2003, p 304-5) claims that his alternative argument for necessitarianism is not based on perfection or infinity, but on the dual premise that the substance is necessarily unique and that another possible world would have to be grounded in the reality of another substance. However, the question is whether the substance could be unique if it were not also absolutely infinite. Spinoza’s demonstration of substance monism in 1p14 appears to be intimately wound up with absolute infinity, i.e. with the divine possession of all possible attributes. But if the substance could not be unique without being absolutely infinite, and if supreme perfection and absolute infinity are (for Spinoza) mutually implicatory, then I wonder whether Koistinen’s own argument is not also ‘perfection-based’. 
One may want to object to this reasoning by pointing out that when absences of things get negated in our world, these absences do produce reality at the anti-world. For example, there are currently no dragonflies living around this lake. In order to build the anti-world, we would negate these absent dragonflies: and, voilà, dragonflies proliferate in the anti-world. However, on Spinoza’s view, absences are not things, and they are in particular not things relatively necessitating other existing things. For Spinoza embraced the adage that there must be as least as much reality in the cause as in the effect (the very principle on which Descartes erected his ontological proof of God in the Third Meditation). This is clear from Spinoza’s remark that that “through which things are said to be determined to produce an effect must be something positive [quid positivum] (as is known through itself)” (1p26d).

But there is nothing positive in absences through which absences can determine things to produce effects. Absences, on Spinoza’s view, are therefore not really causes. (This might collide with our contemporary intuitions. I do not claim to defend Spinoza’s theory of causation here.)

So if we are to negate things that determine other things to produce effects (the very things under discussion at 1p28), then we can only negate things that produce absences, not realities, at the anti-world. If we, for the sake of fidelity to the texts, abstain from supplanting ‘thing’ with ‘fact’ (or ‘truth’), then the anti-world would, were it actual, inevitably lack some reality that is present in our world. For the anti-world can then only be built by successful negation of things that have reality, leading to absences at the anti-world.

Is this observation rendered vacuous by some Cantorian results about infinite sets? Even after an infinity of relatively necessary conjuncts are negated, an infinity could still remain, thus rendering the set of the things in the anti-world ever co-cardinal with the set of the things in the actual world. Koistinen (2003, 294) has observed that given that two modes systems both contain an infinity of modes (of the size aleph-null), it makes no sense to compare their respective quantities. (It should be added that Koistinen’s objection is well-placed, as there is no textual evidence to claim that, for Spinoza, the cardinality of things
in the actual world is of an infinity of a higher order that of another world we might want to consider as possible.)\textsuperscript{113}

However, according to the rules of the game Curley is playing, for a set of propositions to represent a world, it must be closed under valid inference. But unless exactly all propositions positing relatively necessary things as existing are negated or removed, the set of propositions that represent the anti-world will not be thus closed. And so, unless all relatively necessary conjuncts are negated, the set will not be consistent and so not represent a possible world. But once the super-task of negating all relatively necessary things has been completed, no things should remain. (It may be recalled that the reason why absences at this world will not be converted to things at other worlds is that absences are for Spinoza not links in the infinite chain introduced in 1p28.) The set of no things is of a cardinality smaller than that of a set of infinitely many things.

Nonetheless, if an equally plenary set of things is constructible, then it would perhaps really be a genuine alternative to this one. Although such a set might be constructible, it is not by Curley’s means.\textsuperscript{114} Presently I have to put this issue aside. The goal of this chapter is not to vindicate Spinozist necessitarianism - a topic amply debated elsewhere in the literature - but instead to present a new interpretation of the relation between infinity and contingency in Spinozism which is consistent with the necessitarian premise. I have now shown that Curley’s derivation of (objective) contingency from

\textsuperscript{113} By contrast, such a reading could probably be made of Leibniz, because the infinite set of monads in the actual world is arguably of a bigger cardinality than in a possible world where there is not an actual subdivision of matter into organic bodies. More precisely, I think the case can be made that for Leibniz, the infinitely complex actual subdivision of matter into organic bodies (each with an infinity of monads: see, for instance, Monadology § 65 [1885]) enables the set of monads to be of a cardinality bigger than the set of the natural numbers.

\textsuperscript{114} In this regard, Spinoza, mutatis mutandis, faces the same objection as Leibniz does in claiming that there is one unique best possible world. Can it be established that there is exactly one maximally plenary world? For Spinoza, and, it appears to me, for Leibniz as well, the solution generally proposed is an appeal to the Principle of Sufficient Reason. For an argument deriving necessitarianism from the PSR, see Omri Boehm (2016, 569).
infinity is incompatible with other Spinozist assumptions - to wit, with de re modality, the causal impotence of absences and Plenitude.

As previously seen, my alternative interpretation involves the claim that attributions of objective contingency are false in Spinozism but rendered possible by S-contingency and the infinite causal regress. Therefore I am obliged to defend my interpretation against the most recent and most subtle suggestion that such attributions are not false in Spinozism. Allow me to do so in what follows.

4.3.2. Against the proposal that conceptions of contingency contribute to the perfection of the world.

On my reading, S-contingent things are characterized by ontological composition and by its epistemic consequence, that is, by our capacity for conceiving of them as contingent or necessary. If S-contingent things make up an ontological category on their own, it may therefore be said that they are characterized by what they can be imagined to be. God can only be conceived of as existing and chimaeras, such as a square circle, cannot be consistently conceived to exist at all, as their definitions are self-contradictory. Finite creatures, by contrast - having some reality but not all of it - exist halfway between God (who has all of reality) and chimaeras (that have none); while they necessarily exist, they can be conceived as not existing. Indeed, in the CM I, 3, C. 308, Spinoza treats contingency exactly as the property of existing “midway between God and a chimaera”.

Does the conceivability of things as either contingent or necessary contribute to the perfection of the world? (The perfection under scrutiny here is not teleological, but ontological, perfection, the kind of perfection which Spinoza treats as coextensive with reality in 2d6.) Newlands (2010) has claimed that it does. In this thought-provoking paper and elsewhere, Newlands argues that Spinoza is an anti-essentialist with respect to modality - that is, that the modality of things, for Spinoza, varies with how they are conceived -, and that conceiving of things as contingent contributes to the perfection of the world. Of course, to say that the subjective modality of things varies with how they are conceived is tautologous: a thing has the merely subjective “property” F if
it can be conceived as being \( F \). It is rather obvious that things can be conceived as contingent. I take Newlands’ claim to be more substantial: he means that the \textit{objective} modality of things varies with how they are conceived.

Why would Spinoza embrace such a \textit{prima facie} bizarre view? Part of the reasoning behind construing Spinoza as a non-essentialist which Newlands presents in his rich reading can be summarized follows. (It should be noted that this summary is mine.) P1: Spinoza embraces the Principle of Sufficient Reason (the PSR). P2: Spinoza derives the Principle of Plenitude (POP) from the PSR.\(^{115}\) P3: POP requires multiple ways of conceiving of the substance under different attributes, as this makes reality more plenary. Hence, C1: Spinoza embraces multiple ways of conceiving the substance under various attributes. P4: POP requires multitude ways of conceiving of modes modally in the same way as it requires multitude ways of conceiving of the substance under different attributes. Hence, C2: Spinoza embraces multitude ways of conceiving of modes modally.

The premise I will take issue with is P4. However, it is helpful to first explain P3, in order to see whether there is the relevant symmetry between ways of conceiving the substance (as attributes) and ways of conceiving modes (as contingent or necessary) that allows both these variabilities in conceivability to be perfect-making features of the world, fulfilling the demands on ontological plenitude. If there is no such relevant symmetry, then C2 might not be justified, although C1 is right.

Spinoza’s doctrine that the substance’s absolutely infinite essence is perceived under infinite attributes may be called the doctrine of Infinite Attributes Conceivability. Absolute infinity is to exist and be conceivable under infinite attributes, each of which is also infinite in kind (1d6). If attributes - different ways of conceiving the substance (1d4) - collapsed, some ways of conceiving it would obviously be lacking; the substance would thereby be impoverished, and no longer absolutely infinite. Spinoza seems to be adamant that the substance

\(^{115}\) Lovejoy (1933, 155) too deduces the Spinozist deduction of the principle of plenitude from the principle of sufficient reason.
can be conceived to be infinite in infinite ways - since this testifies to the ontological richness (the absolute infinity) of its nature.

To avoid any possible attribute-collapse, Spinoza (in 1p10) erects what is commonly called a conceptual barrier between the attributes. The fact that the attributes are conceptually isolated ensures that they are indeed fundamentally different ways of conceiving things. Since the attributes are conceptually self-conceived, they are also causally self-conceived (this follows from 1a4 and is explicitly stated in 2p6).

As Della Rocca (1996, 19)\(^{116}\) has most stringently pointed out, this results in an infinite semantic parallelism where causally and conceptually isolated explanations of things under various attributes co-exist independently of each other. This semantic parallelism has the noteworthy consequence that contexts of the form ‘… causes x’ (or ‘… is conceived through x’) are referentially opaque: substitutions in these contexts of co-referring terms are not truth-preserving when the contexts in question are attribute-specific. So, for Spinoza, even though the idea of my body - my mind -, and my body are identical, it is nonetheless false to say that my body causes a mental effect caused by mind or that my mind causes a physical effect caused by my body. But what in Spinoza’s philosophy motivates this intensionality?

On Newlands’s reading, Spinoza is willing to trade off the transparency of some contexts for the benefit of more perfection. To put it succinctly, by embracing the thesis of Infinite Attributes Conceivability and the ensuing semantic parallelism, Spinoza’s metaphysics gains in perfection exactly what it loses in extensionality. For the substance is the locus of maximum ontological plenitude only if it can be conceived to be infinite under an infinite amount of attributes. Since this seems right I agree with Newlands (2010, 73) that Infinite Attributes Conceivability is one “axis of plenitude”.

Let us also grant Newlands the plausible view that the infinity of finite modes established in 1p16 is another such axis of plenitude. Spinoza clearly speaks in this way; not only does the substance “express itself” as infinite in infinite

\(^{116}\) Since Della Rocca only discusses the attributes of Extension and Thought, he speaks of a duality here.
attributes, in each attribute it also expresses itself as an infinity of finite modes (for the modes as expressive of substances/attributes: see 1p36d; 3p6d and 1p25dc). These modes are locked in an infinite causal nexus (as per 1p28). I agree that, given Spinoza’s metaphysical outlook, the infinite causal ancestry of finite things is one of the two necessary conditions for their conceivability as contingent (the other being their S-contingency), and I also agree that the infinity of their causal ancestors is a perfect-making feature of the world. But is it, as Newlands maintains, also the case that the ensuing variability in conceivability of things as either necessary or as contingent is a perfect-making feature of the world?

I would like to issue a cavea here. A line is to be drawn between the way the thing is conceived - as contingent - and the fact that something is conceived at all. Of course, there is a given physical state of my body even when I am only imagining things, and so too, when I perceive them as contingent. Qua physical and mental states of human beings and as such modes of modes, imaginations are real even though what is imagined is not. Of course, every mode that is, is to the extent that it is, (ontologically) perfect (2d6), and therefore contributive to the overall perfect scheme of things. I do not take issue with this. Nor do I believe that this is Newlands’ central claim: for then he would merely have said that having any idea at all, whatever its content, contributes to the perfection of the world, not that having ideas specifically about the various modalities of things so contributes.

When I deny that conceiving of things as contingent contributes to the perfection of the world, what I deny is specifically that the attribution of an objective property - namely contingency - to things, contributes anything in particular to the perfection of the world. I grant that in being ideas, inadequate ideas too contribute to some perfection in the world. But they do not so in virtue of what makes them inadequate.

Indeed, it seems that the actual conception of something as contingent, as such, contributes nil to the perfection of the world. For the conception of something as contingent is always executed by the imagination alone (2p44c). And when left unchecked by reason the imagination brings about all and only error (see 4p1s). And since “error consists in the privation of knowledge” (2p35s) - that is
in lack of objective being and hence a kind of non-being, and perfection is co-extensive with being (2d6), error can contribute nil to the perfection of the world.

Newlands (2010, 78, n. 31) deals with this objection, for his reading pivots around the claim that while, for Spinoza, falsity and error implies inadequacy, the reverse implication does not hold: inadequacy does not imply falsity and error. Hence, although attributions of contingency are certainly inadequate (see 2p31c for a detailed explanation of why), they are nonetheless not false. It is, crucially, because our conceptions of things as contingent are not false that non-essentialism can be true. Because non-essentialism with regards to modality is exactly the view that the objective modality of things depends on how they are conceived. But if things are only falsely conceived as being of a certain modality, then that conception can obviously not ground their being of such a modality. In order to motivate that the implication goes in one direction only, Newlands refers to several important passages in the second part of the *Ethics*, all of which fail to substantiate the hypothesis that inadequacy implies falsity (namely 2p11c; 2p35 and 2p49s).

One way of refuting Newlands’ view would thus be to argue that, for Spinoza, inadequacy and falsity are in fact co-extensional.\(^{117}\) In this paper, I will not opt for this way. I will instead argue that, regardless of whether this is so or not, conceptions of contingency are not only inadequate but also false, on Spinoza’s view. To posit contingency as existing (that is, as an instantiated property) is false, because, for Spinoza, contingency is a being of reason, and beings of reason do not exist (are not instantiated).

In defence of his reading, Newlands asks:

[S]urely it will be strange if some limited or partial expressions of substance can be involved in true predications, while no limited or partial expressions of modes can involve true predications. Why should falsity and truth work so differently for incomplete expressions of substance and modes? (2010, p 78, n. 31.)

\(^{117}\) For two readings that, pace Newlands, read inadequacy and falsity as co-extensive in Spinoza, see Della Rocca (1996, p 107-10) and Schmid (2008).
Providing an answer to that question would weigh in against accepting Newlands’ interpretation. First, it is to be noted that, since perfection and reality are convertible, perfect-making features must be such that also make for reality. On my view, so-called “true but limited expressions of substance”, e.g. your body and mine, and the ideas of these, can serve the purposes of plenitude since we are something. But things which are not real - beings of reason, say - contribute nil to plenitude, for there is strictly speaking no being that our thoughts are directly about when beings of reasons are entertained as objects of thought.

What is a being of reason? One paradigmatic example is evil. For Spinoza, evil is an absence that our imagination hypostasizes and wrongly construes as a lack of a due god. It is thus not surprising to find that Spinoza elaborates on an answer to the question of which prima facie real properties are in metaphysical rigor not real properties at all, in his explication of that important notion. Let us therefore turn to Spinoza’s correspondence with Blijenbergh, the only extant set of texts where that notion is expounded at length.

In Letter 23 (to Blijenbergh, March 1665) Spinoza indicates some of the properties that he considers to fall short of contributing reality/perfection to the world. On Spinoza’s view, God causes all and only reality/perfection. Pressed by Blijenbergh, Spinoza first concedes that Nero’s or Orestes’ matricides were perfect insofar as they were caused by God. (In Letter 23, he speaks of things which are real/perfect in this way as “expressing essence”). Following tradition, Spinoza construes (for instance) the external act of raising the arm to stab someone as perfection (or as Spinoza perhaps would want to put it, “expressive of essence”). To have the capacity to stab as well as to actually execute the act of stabbing, are species of perfection, the complement of which is negation, whether it be incapacity or weakness. Since evil is negation, Nero’s

---

118 In the Ethics too, essence is convertible with perfection (see 3GenDefAff). A critic of Spinoza’s conceptual equivalencies might want to say that if essence is perfection, and existence perfection, then essence is existence, and the ontological distinction between substance and modes crumbles. I cannot here provide a comment on this challenge.
matricide was blameworthy exactly in what it did not contain of reality/perfection. Spinoza asks:

What, then, was Nero’s knavery? Nothing but this: he showed by that act that he was ungrateful, without compassion and disobedient. And it is certain that none of these things express essence. Therefore, God was not the cause of them [for, as Spinoza writes earlier: God is absolutely and really the cause [sc. only] of everything that has essence] (C. 388).

Letter 23 is consistent with Spinoza’s ontological project as announced early on in his philosophical career. The opening section of the CM warns us against the philosophical dangers of dividing being into being and non-being, and it is clear that Spinoza always sought to maintain vigilance against non-beings masquerading as beings. Yet if something does not have being, it cannot have perfection. And, it cannot give what it itself doesn’t own, since this would contradict the adage (as we saw previously, embraced by Spinoza) that there must be at least as much perfection in the cause as in the effect.

It remains to be shown that contingency is indeed a non-being. According to the list Spinoza provides in the CM, non-beings comprise beings of reason, beings of the imagination and chimaeras. (Spinoza is a bit ironically sticking with the traditional, but on his view misleading, terminology, which nominally elevates these non-beings to beings.) For present purposes, it is sufficient to focus on “Measure, Time and Number”, which are not modes of substance, but “modes of thinking, or rather, imagining” (Letter 12, C. 203). Interestingly, for Spinoza, these modes of imagining all arise because of the same reason. More precisely, they arise “when we conceive Quantity abstractly from Substance and separate Duration from the way it flows from eternal things” (Letter 12, C. 203). According to Spinoza, we conceive an infinite quantity abstractly when we conceive of it as divisible. As we have seen, we can do this only by considering it as composed of parts that are really distinct from each other, that is, contingent in relation to each other and (as a consequence) separable. But any attribute that we conceive a substance under which admits of division is falsely conceived, because, as Spinoza states in 1p12: “No attribute of a substance can be truly conceived from which it follows that the substance can be divided.” Time, number and measure are all only applicable when we
conceive of some quantity as conceptually divisible into parts. And we conceive of a quantity as composed of parts by imagining it as constituted by contingently co-existing parts. According to this genealogy of beings of the imagination, they all arise when we mistakenly imagine contingency where there is no contingency. Unless the imagination is checked by reason, we will mistakenly attribute contingency to modes, and as a consequence, think of them as objectively temporal and measurable. For this reason, it seems plausible that contingency too is a being of the imagination. But as Spinoza points out, beings of the imagination are not beings at all, but rather non-beings. And since perfection must be being, beings of the imagination cannot, as such, contribute any perfection at all.

I submit that we could not think of modes of substance as contingent without falsely thinking of substance as divisible and conversely, we could not think of substance as divisible without thinking of its modes as contingent in relation to the whole. If I am right in that, for Spinoza, these two views imply each other and one is committed to one if one holds the other, then regardless of whether inadequacy implies falsity or not, we are thinking falsely of modes when we think of them as contingent in the same way as we think falsely of a substance when we imagine it as divisible.

This is not to deny, of course, that any idea, being real, has perfection and thus contributes to the overall perfect scheme of things. Nor is it intended to deny that the conceivability of something as contingent may still follow from perfect-making features of the world. However, I would like to claim that this conceivability is not itself such a feature; it is a mere side-effect of a perfect-making feature. More precisely, it is a side-effect of the perfect-making feature of the universe which consists in its plenitude, that is in its being maximally (infinitely) populated with finite things.

Let me sum up the difference between Newlands’ reading and mine. On Newlands’ reading, the conceivability of things as contingent or necessary makes the world more perfect than it would otherwise have been, and, given non-essentialism, the objective modality of the thing in question is a function of how it is conceived. On my reading, while there is certainly a variability in which subjective modality we can assign to things, the contingency we ascribe
to things does not reflect their objective modality. So the objective modality of a thing is not a function of how it is conceived. Finite modes appear contingent for two reasons. First, because their ontological composition makes it impossible for us to deduce their necessity from their essence and second, because their infinite production makes it impossible for us to deduce their necessity from their causes. But conceiving of things as contingent does not contribute to the perfection of the world, although the fact that there are conceptions at all does so contribute.

Conclusion.

In this chapter, I have suggested that it is because finite things are both S-contingent and generated by an infinite succession of causes that they, on their own, don’t provide the information that allows us to “see” their necessity.

But what is the point of all these meandering distinctions? The point is, as implied at the onset of this chapter, ethical and, as I intend to show shortly, even therapeutical. Let me conclude by pointing out the practical significance of Spinoza’s modal metaphysics.

The abyss separating the apparently contingent things of the world from their necessitating ground (God) cannot be over-bridged by reason - from the direction of the singular things, that is. In contrast, Spinoza maintains that with God’s essence as one’s point of departure, one can arrive at the necessity of things: I cannot here describe this process in any detail, but setting aside other difficult aspects of that doctrine, this is indeed what happens in the third kind of knowledge, in which individual essences are known to follow from God’s nature (2p40s2).

Spinoza makes do without many assumptions which our “common sense” deems as matters of course. For instance, he denies the divisibility of infinite quantities and he denies that we have the power to suspend our will. But there is one datum of experience which Spinoza is not willing to explain away, and that is our slavery to passions. Slavery to passions is Spinoza’s point of departure. How is slavery to passions for things which are less than infinite and infinitely less real than what is infinitely perfect, to be explained? It would be utterly inexplicable if we were not victims of some grandiose illusion concerning what these things are.
Indeed, on Spinoza’s view, we are enslaved by passions only to the extent that we fall prey to inadequate ideas. For instance, we imagine the things for which we burn to be anything but necessary. In Chapter 6, I will explore Spinoza’s claim that affects toward things which we conceive of as free - thereby meaning things that we think of as not determined by causes other than themselves - are greater than all other affects, while affects toward things we regard as necessary are more easily curbed. Because, in spite of the fact that modes are necessary, we often regard them as if they were free. It is, in short, because we misconceive them as free that we are consumed by passions for them.

In conclusion, Spinoza was willing to jettison the Aristotelian rejection of an actualized infinity because he thought could thereby safeguard the appearance of contingency in a world where all is necessary. And this appearance of contingency, in turn, grounds the reality of slavery.
Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction.

A very strange picture of perfection is taking shape. In order to see that picture clearly, it is worthwhile to back away, for the moment being, from all historical connections and more detailed exegesis and instead focus more sharply on the relations that hold between the various claims that together form this theory of perfection.

Before I discuss the relations just mentioned, however, it is worthwhile to first introduce the importance of the PSR and divine infinity and perfection in some more detail. I will do so by (1) indicating their respective roles in one of Spinoza’s arguments for God’s necessary existence in the Ethics 1p11d. In order to determine the role that divine infinity and perfection play in this argument, it will be necessary to in addition discuss Spinoza’s theory that conceivability entails being but not existence. However, the distinction between mere being and existence poses serious difficulties within the system and I do not claim that I, within the scope of this discussion, can solve them here.

The basic picture will then be drawn by discussing four relations of grounding, namely (2) that of necessitarianism in the PSR, (3) that of necessitarianism in divine infinity and perfection and finally, (4) the absence of (ontologically solid) imperfection in necessitarianism. While it is arguable the PSR grounds divine infinity and perfection too, this relation will not be under scrutiny in this chapter. My present purpose is to show that it is the grounding of necessitarianism in divine perfection and infinity (3) that is crucial to Spinoza in the establishment of (4), i.e. the absence of (ontologically solid) imperfection in the world. This result is interesting because it shows that, as far as his theory of perfection is concerned,
Spinoza’s theology - and more precisely his view that God is absolutely infinite - takes precedence over his metaphysical rationalism. (The tension between these two different priorities has previously been raised by Melamed [2013a]). Lastly, (in section 5.5) I link this picture of metaphysical perfection with Spinoza’s account of strictly human perfection. Subsequent parts of the thesis will deal with the problem raised in the final section, namely with how a reconceptualization of infinity along theological lines can be integrated into Spinoza’s practical philosophy of self-cultivation.

5.1. The second argument for God’s necessary existence in 1p11d.

Bennett’s influential reading from 1984 presents Spinoza as a metaphysical rationalist. Metaphysical rationalism is the name for a philosophical view that one obtains by endorsing the Principle of Sufficient Reason (the PSR), which Spinoza expresses in various passages throughout his work. Ever since Bennett’s contribution, readings that emphasize Spinoza’s commitment to this principle, have come been widely endorsed - one may even think that they now tend to dominate the anglophone scholarship.

What is the PSR? The principle has been given various definitions. It can be regarded as the view that there is an answer to every why-question, or that there is an explanation or ground for every truth, fact or thing (this is not an exhaustive list). In this thesis I am not concerned with presenting the strongest possible version of the PSR, and so I will not present a satisfying theory of what exactly should ideally count as a sufficient reason (e.g. explanation or ground). Of course, explanation and ground are concepts philosophers still struggle to explicate. And whether or not one is inclined to accept the PSR may depend on how one understands its pivotal concept. Nonetheless I will

119 For an overview, see the section on Spinoza in Melamed and Lin (2018). The key passages listed by Melamed and Lin (2018) are: PPC, Part 1, axiom 11; 1a2; more controversially 1a3; 1p11d and 1p8s2. I here unpack one argument in 1p11d which relies on the PSR, without discussing or even mentioning all references to the PSR in Spinoza’s oeuvre.

120 I will just provide one example of how to (stipulatively) define explanation so as to render the PSR false. Campbell Withaker (2004) construes why-explanation as deductive
follow Spinoza in speaking of the PSR as giving reasons for the existence (or non-existence) of things (see 1p11d). Of course, if there are sufficient reasons for the existence or non-existence of things, there are also sufficient reasons for the truths that such things exist (or fail to exist). And likewise, if there are sufficient reasons for the propositions that things exist or fail to exist, then it appears that there should be sufficient reasons for the existence or non-existence of the things themselves as well. So the choice appears trivial. What is gained by sticking with Spinoza’s preferred way of speaking? By speaking as he does, Spinoza, I believe, is attempting to describe the way things are at a metaphysically fundamental level. It is because something first and foremost exists, that the proposition that it does so is true. For Spinoza, all our true knowledge must be based on reality (1p30). This claim may not appear original, but it is manifested in some innovative solutions. For example, in order for us to be able to speak coherently of things such as a merely constructible rectangle, Spinoza - as we will see shortly - grants that these have being, while denying that they exist.

On Spinoza’s version of the PSR, that principle is compatible with there being no external reasons for the existence of necessary things. The reason why the PSR, thus understood, entails that there exists something that does not owe its existence to anything but itself, is the following. If there, ultimately, is to be a complete explanation for everything, the propagation of explanations must terminate somewhere. At the terminus of that propagation of explanations, there should be a

subsumption under a generalization. The last-mentioned concept Whitaker unpacks as follows: “A law or a generalization is the statement of an order or pattern of uniformity, and a thing is subsumed under a generalization when it is shown to fit within or correspond to the order or uniformity expressed in the generalization.” On the basis of this understanding of explanation, he argues that there cannot be any explanation for the whole of everything there is, the so-called universe. For a generalization always involves something beyond the particular. Is the ultimate explanation or the ultimately explanatory thing in the set of things that it explains (all truths or all things)? If it is not inside the universe, it is not a member of what is, and so is nothing. But if it is inside the universe, it is not beyond that which it explains and so cannot explain it. There are no other options and the options are mutually exclusive. Hence, Whitaker concludes that the question of why there is such a thing as the universe is unanswerable and as a consequence meaningless. (Needless to point out, Whitaker’s argument presupposes that this contradiction is not true. Graham Priest (2006 and elsewhere) argues that true contradictions arise exactly at the limits of explanation. Priest would consider the paradox Whitaker appeals to an instance of his Inclosure Schema.)
thing that both exists necessarily and which cannot owe its necessity to anything else. If it is to be explained at all, it must within itself have the resources to explain its own existence. It should come as no surprise, then, that the PSR is one of the premises on which Spinoza’s demonstration for the necessary existence of such a thing is predicated. Next, I will consider the second demonstration Spinoza provides for God’s necessary existence (1p11d). As it stands in the text, the PSR is but one premise in the argument for God’s necessary existence.

The demonstration can be broken down as follows:

P1: There is for every thing a reason for its nonexistence (or existence).
P2: That reason must be either internal (viz. contained in the essence of the thing) or external.
P3: To give a reason for the nonexistence (or existence) of something is also to provide the cause for the nonexistence (or existence) of that thing.
P4: Substances cannot interact causally.
C1: The reason for the nonexistence of a substance cannot be external (from P3; P4).
P5: There is an internal reason for nonexistence only when the essence of a thing is such that if it were instantiated, that instantiation would entail a contradiction.\(^{122}\)
P6: The essence of a substance is not such that its instantiation would entail a contradiction.
C2: The reason for the nonexistence of a substance cannot be internal (from P5; P6).
C3: There can be no internal or external reason for the nonexistence of a substance - or a substance necessarily exists.

\(^{121}\) Sometimes, Spinoza’s demonstrations in 1p11d are construed as ontological arguments in favour of God’s existence. By contrast, Ruth Barcan (1993, p. 173) has argued that what Spinoza is concerned with demonstrating is rather the fact that God exists in the mode of necessity. On Barcan’s analysis of the Ethics, there are no detours via the subject of knowledge in any of Spinoza’s demonstrations of God’s (necessary) existence, and for that reason, they do not, according to her, qualify as ontological.

\(^{122}\) I owe this way of construing Spinoza’s notion of a self-contradictory essence to Lin (2010, p. 277).
P7: God is a substance.
C4: God exists necessarily (from C3; P7).

Many of these premises are far from self-evident, but to discuss all of them is a task that I cannot undertake here.

Above, I mentioned that the PSR intuitively appears to entail the existence of some necessary thing, one in which all explanatory chains must ultimately terminate. On Spinoza’s view, such a thing is, by definition, a substance (1d3), for only a substance is “conceived [viz. explained] through itself”. Moreover, the substance is unique.\(^\text{123}\) If God is to be the ground of all there is, he must be that substance. Hence, it appears that the PSR alone, along with the definition of substance and the equation of God with substance, would suffice to establish God’s necessary existence. Interestingly, Spinoza’s reasoning is richer in premises than what appears to be requisite.

It is especially P6 - the premise that the notion of substance is coherent - that appears to lead Spinoza away from such an ideologically parsimonious landscape. Is God’s nature really such that its instantiation would entail no contradiction, as P6 demands? The justification Spinoza provides for P6 seems question-begging. He says:

\begin{quote}
Since, then, there can be outside the divine nature, no reason, or, cause which takes away the divine existence, the reason will necessarily have to be in this nature itself, if indeed he does not exist. That is, his nature would involve a contradiction […] But it is absurd to affirm this of a Being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect (1p11d G. II/53).
\end{quote}

The premise that substances cannot causally interact is listed as P4 above. In his refutation of the possibility of external reasons for the nonexistence of substances,

\(^{123}\) The demonstration for substance monism/monotheism Spinoza provides in 1p14. I will not deal with the details of that argument here. The PSR appears to force upon us the notion of one ultimate necessarily existing being, unless there can be a sufficient reason for two or more beings, severally necessitating everything. But such a reason is difficult to discover.
Spinoza is relying on the assumption that a substance in order to causally interfere with another substance to prevent it from existing, would have to share an attribute with it, which is impossible because of the ban against attribute-sharing substances (1p5). It is worth mentioning, however, that the same result which follows from that ban also follows from the absolute infinity of the substance. Because if the substance is absolutely infinite in such a way that there can be nothing outside it, its existence can evidently not be hampered with from without. Each of these reasons on its own provides sufficient justification for P4.

But likewise, the fact that God is absolutely infinite makes it impossible for there to be any internal reasons for his nonexistence. The infinity of substance is thus also put to the task of rendering internal reasons for nonexistence impossible. As the citation above indicates, Spinoza cannot be said to have elaborated very much on how he reached that conclusion.

It is to be noted that Spinoza does not say that it is a contradiction in terms to say of a substance, which is by definition self-conceived and thus conceived, that it is inconceivable. That line of reasoning would have been more readily accessible. Instead he says that the absurdity consists in thus construing a being supremely perfect and absolutely infinite.

Let me first present the reason Spinoza presumably held it an absurdity that we should think of a supremely perfect and absolutely infinite being as non-existing. I would like to suggest that Spinoza thinks of inconceivability as a kind of negation, and more precisely, as the negation of a form of being. Spinoza’s understanding of infinity renders it a conceptual impossibility that there be such a negation of being in an absolutely infinite thing. In 1ps81, he says:

Since being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature, it follows from 1p7 [viz. the idea that it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist] alone that every substance must be infinite. [NS: For if we assumed a finite substance, we would in part deny existence to its nature, which (by 1p7) is absurd] (Emphasis added).
Inconceivable “things” (although perhaps they do not merit this ontological honorific) can have no being as objects of ideas. To have being as the object of an idea is to be conceiveable. But Spinoza insists (indeed, his idea-mode parallelism obliges him to insist) that there must to every idea correspond something in the attributes distinct from thought. But it is absurd to think of something absolutely infinite as being existentially deprived of being under any attribute. That which is absolutely infinite must not only be but also exist under all attributes. Because to be absolutely infinite is to have one’s existence affirmed in every possible way, and all attributes, are ways of being.

On my reading, Spinoza’s cited explanation of why it would be an “absurdity” to think of an absolutely infinite being as inconceivable presupposes only that conceivable involves being. Existence comes into play not because of what conceivable involves, but because of how absolute infinity is defined. It may be noted that this assumption - that everything that is conceivable has being - is weaker than a widespread reading of Spinoza according to which everything that is possible and conceivable exists, and so should be acceptable to at least all who accept the stronger claim. On my reading of Spinoza, whatever exists, is, but not all things that are need exist. Let me elucidate this further.

In 2p8, Spinoza states: “The ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God’s infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of singular things, or modes, are contained in God’s attributes.” In the scholium Spinoza anticipates the reader’s request for an example by saying:

If anyone wishes me to explain this further by an example, I will, of course, not be able to give one which adequately explains what I speak of here, since it is unique. Still, I shall try as far as possible to illustrate the matter… (Emphasis added)

He then proceeds to give a geometrical example of how we can construct, in a circle, an infinite amount of equal rectangles. It may so happen that one of the rectangles has been drawn and thus exists. That rectangle then has being not only as the possible object of an idea but also as an existent. Spinoza’s point is that the ideas of the other constructible but not yet existing rectangles also have being.
They have being because they are “contained in the idea of the circle”. We cannot (adequately) conceive of a circle within which infinite rectangles cannot be drawn by following the constructive procedure of which Spinoza speaks. It is interesting that Spinoza, before providing this example, indicates that it is in a way inexact. Why does not the case with the rectangles inscribable within a circle exemplify the case of inexistent (formal) essences being “contained in God’s attributes”? I take it that Spinoza’s example is (as he himself acknowledges) not an actual example for the following reason. The circle is to stand for an attribute of God; the constructed rectangle stands for existing things on a par with you and me, and the constructible but as yet nonexistent rectangles stand for things that have being merely insofar as their essences are contained in God’s attributes.

What Spinoza provides is an analogy, because the circle is at most an existing thing on a par with you or me. Rectangles of certain dimensions can be constructed within circles of certain radii. It is the nature of the circle that determines the dimensions of the rectangles that can be constructed within it. But this is the case merely because we first postulated the circle. By comparison, God’s nature is primary not because we postulated it first but in a more fundamental way. Indeed, the way in which God is more fundamental than us cannot be exemplified, “since it is unique”. What then accounts for which kinds of things can have being as formal essences in his attributes? Since God’s attributes are infinite in kind, there can be no limit to the kinds of things whose formal essences can be contained within them. The essence of every conceivable thing is so contained.

It may be worth noting that the view that all possibilia are actualized in existence and not only as beings appears to be forced upon Spinoza by Curley’s translation of 1p35. 1p35 reads: Quicquid concipimus in Dei potestate esse, id necessario est. But although Curley renders this est as ‘exists’, and although it often so understood in the secondary literature, it is at least not self-evident that Spinoza

---

124 Curley points out that Spinoza is here citing a method from theorem 35, book III, of Euclid’s Elements. C. 452, n. 15.
125 E.g. Koistinen (1998, p. 61), Omri Boehm (2016, p. 569). At least Koistinen’s reading is clearly based on Curley’s translation of 1p35. By contrast, Boehm’s attribution to Spi-
is here speaking of the kind of being that we call existence. Spinoza’s commitment to the actualization of all conceivable things need not entail the existence of all conceivable things. Let us assume that human beings can conceive of anything whose definition is not self-contradictory. The beings that we cannot conceive are not even possibly beings; to this category of pseudo-entities belong “chimeras” such as the square circle or an object that is simultaneously red and green all over. Moreover, exactly the same objects belong to the category of things we can conceive and the category of things we can conceive to be within God’s power.126 And everything whose definition is not self-refuting, that is, everything we can conceive to be within God’s power, is, but it need not on that account exist.

My conjecture is thus that Spinoza occupies a position halfway between contemporary actualism and concretism. By actualism I mean the view that there are only “this-worldly actual entities”, by concretism the view that there are “concrete non-actual entities”.127 Spinoza’s view is like the concretist in that he acknowledges a difference between different kinds of being: to wit, between existence and mere being. While the concretist attributes existence to possibilia (albeit in universes spatiotemporally disconnected from our universe), Spinoza attributes being to all conceivable things.128 But this kind of being consists in being actualized in an attribute of God. So, he is like the actualist in believing only in things actualized in our universe: whether they be actualized through existence or through another kind of being. (In order to make the claim I just made, I relied on the assumption that God or Nature, as existing in infinite attributes, is one universe. This, one may object, isn’t the case: some, indeed most, attributes are beyond our epistemic horizon, and thus more like separate universes. However, I think it is more accurate to think of the Spinozist God as a

126 That this is indeed Spinoza’s view should not be controversial. But why does our ability to conceive things in different ways track God’s power? This question merits careful attention.
127 I borrow this way of phrasing the distinction from Pruss (2011, pp. 126-7).
128 If the diamond of possibility could be interpreted in terms of conceivable, then Spinoza would thus probably accept the iconic formula that ((Conceivably) (There is) an x such that x is F) entails ((There is an x) such that (conceivably) x is F).
multi-dimensional universe than as a multiverse. While we have no reason to think that anything identical with ourselves exist in separate universes, this is entailed by one of the parallelisms Spinoza endorses (namely the parallelism between modes as conceived under different attributes), and so it appears more accurate to think of modes as existing in one universe, but in infinitely many dimensions, than to think of the attributes as slicing up being into something like multiverses.) So, beings can, I think, on Spinoza’s view, be divided into necessarily actual objects (things that do not exist, but which have being as formal essences in some attribute of God) and necessarily actual objects that also exist. (Of course, a contemporary actualist would not say that, since she is most likely to be committed to the view that some things are contingent. But there are for Spinoza no contingent things.)

It should be clear from 2p8 alone that something can have being as formal essences in an attribute of God without therefore existing. Of course, things that exist are also conceivable. But Spinoza’s talk of things that have being without therefore existing poses several, rarely noted, problems for any consistent interpretation of his philosophy. It is worthwhile to present some of these problems here.

I take existence to be a certain manner of being. But what is the mark of existence, which singles existing things out from the ones that merely are?

Spinoza is not alone in acknowledging fundamentally different modes of being. Taking a cue from contemporary philosophies of modality, one may perhaps wish to map Spinoza’s distinction between existence and being onto the contemporary one between actuality and existence. While actuality, for contemporary concretists, requires things to exist in the same spacetime as we do, existence does not. On a concretist understanding of possible entities, these entities exist, albeit non-spatiotemporally (or, more accurately, not in our spacetime).

Perhaps, similarly in Spinozism, only existing things are in spacetime.
How about space? For Spinoza, extension is an attribute. Attribute parallelism entails that whatever is extended exists also in all of God’s other infinite attributes. So, things cannot exist because they are in extension as opposed to being in any other attribute. But perhaps their being in extension can be what explains their existing, even if they are also actualized in other (parallel) attributes? This won’t do. For if something conceived under a different attribute existed because it were identical with something extended, the existence of things that are conceived under other attributes than extension would be explained by an appeal to their being identical with an extended mode. This would flaunt what is popularly called Spinoza’s explanatory barrier between attributes, according to which no things conceived under different attributes can be explained by reference to each other (i.e. there is no cross-attribute explanation of substances or their modes as conceived under different attributes: see 1p10). If the mark of existence in a thing conceived under an attribute other than extension were that it was somehow parallel to something extended, then a certain feature of that thing - its existence - would be explainable only by reference to an attribute under which that thing was not presently conceived, and this appears to be an infraction against the explanatory self-containment of the attributes.

How about time then? Perhaps existing things, unlike things that merely are but fail to exist, are in time. One may initially be wary about temporality being the mark of existence, since God exists, and yet is eternal. As we saw in the preceding chapter, however, Spinoza appears to discredit the property of temporality. In Letter 12, he insists that time is merely a tool of the imagination whereby we conceive of things as having duration. Temporality is therefore not, on Spinoza’s view, an objective property of things.

But need the mark of existence be an objective property of things? Perhaps it could be a merely relational one. For a world to be actual, on a popular theory of
actuality, means for it to be ours.\textsuperscript{129} Spinozist existence could perhaps similarly be construed in relation to an observer.

This suggestion would have been rejected by Spinoza. In his cosmological argument for God’s existence (1p11d, G. II/53), Spinoza claims that not to be able to exist is to lack power, while to be able to exist is to have power. What kind of power is Spinoza speaking of? Presumably the same kind of power that he later mentions in 1p36 - namely that of being able to produce effects. But the causal power of a thing is not normally to be established by the relation of that thing to an observer. Based on previous chapters, one may wish to construe the power of existing as consisting exactly in the power to bring about effects. But such causal activity co-varies with one’s perfection (5p40): arguably, one’s perfection is even identical with one’s causal activity. But such perfection is of the ontological, not the teleological stripe, and is thus not to be defined in relation to a human mind. It is instead a genuine property of things.

It is clear from 1p36 that Spinoza takes existence to involve the causation of at least some effect. For this reason, it is tempting to take the causation of effects as the mark of existence. The reason why this solution is untenable is internal to Spinozism: it arises from Spinoza’s own system of equivalencies. Perfection, Spinoza says, co-varies with activity (5p40), by which he understands the causal production of effects. But perfection is defined with reality in 2d6, and reality is defined with being (esse) in 1p10s. Hence, if existence, but not being, is coextensive with the causation of effects, then being (esse) cannot be coextensive with itself.

So far, all these \textit{prima facie} plausible interpretations of Spinoza’s distinction between existence and mere being run counter to other doctrines he also maintains. What is one then to make of the distinction? In what follows I will gesture toward a solution, though I cannot undertake to provide a full-scale defence of it here.

\textsuperscript{129} Perhaps there could be a relevant similarity between such a theory of existence and the indexical theory of the actuality of our world. Since, however, it turns out that for Spinoza existence cannot be defined relationally, I will not explore this potential similarity.
If we return to 2p8s, the difference between the causality exerted by an existing rectangle and the causality exerted by a merely conceivable one is easily imaginable. Perhaps the existing rectangle has been constructed in the circle with the help of ropes tied to the ground. The rectangle can now cause someone to trip over them. The merely conceivable rectangle has no such power. It is in fact hard to think of a merely constructible rectangle as exerting any causal influence at all. This however does not yet show that a formal essence inscribed in an attribute of God is similarly powerless. For, at the very least, as the object of an idea it gives rise to a concatenation of ideas in God’s intellect. Nonetheless, the way in which things that exist operate as causes differ from the way in which things that merely are operate as causes. For one can, I think, distinguish between the kind of causes that produces a thing as existing and the kind of cause that causes it to merely be.

Existence, is, on Spinoza’s view, “attributed to singular things because infinitely many things follow from the eternal necessity of God’s nature in infinitely many modes” (2p44s). Yet, not even God, from whose nature they follow, can think of these things as existing in abstraction from other things which cause them (ad infinitum: 1p28). By contrast, God need not think of what other things cause some thing to be formally inscribed in one of his attribute; it is enough for him to entertain the thought of the attribute to thereby automatically know the formal essences inscribed in it. It is indeed because formal essences have being only in virtue of being features of God’s attributes that knowledge of the attributes suffices to yield knowledge of these essences. On this proposal, finite existing things differ from things that merely are in that they operate as causes only by belonging to infinitely regressing chains. But how about the difference between things that exist and things that merely are when both are infinite? It may be responded that on Spinoza’s view, all absolutely infinite things we can conceive must also exist, and so that category of things should not confound us. This response, however, faces the potentially devastating problem of the infinite modes. Surely, we can conceive of different infinite modes than the ones that exist? For this reason, although it is stronger than others, this solution is also fraught with difficulties.
In this chapter, I cannot resolve the difficulties that surround Spinoza’s distinction between being and existence. Nonetheless, it was necessary to discuss at some length Spinoza’s distinctions between being and existence in order to see why conceivability entails being, and existence being, but being does not entail existence. In addition, I hope I have showed that this distinction allows Spinoza to say that our talk of *possibilia qua* merely conceivable beings (rather than modally speaking genuinely possible beings) is about something that has being.

Let me conclude this section by drawing the relations between the necessary existence of God, the PSR and divine infinity and perfection. It may be surmised that if there is no self-explanatory thing the PSR fails. If the PSR is granted, the essence of the self-explanatory thing must be instantiated. But, interestingly, for Spinoza such a self-explanatory thing must have certain (divine) features. It must be infinite (in the Spinozist sense of equaling the totality), for otherwise it could be inconceivable (and then C2 would not follow) and it could be prevented from existing from without (and then C1 would not follow). In the former case, inconceivability entails lack of being and since all existence is being, lack of existence. But an absolutely infinite thing could, by definition, not lack existence. In the latter case, there are two reasons as to why C2 should hold. It follows immediately from P4, the ban against substances interfering causally with each other. But C2 also follows from the substance’s absolute infinity. Unless the substance were impervious to causal influence from without, the reason why the substance existed would be conditional upon another thing’s not preventing it from existing, and why *that* thing behaved in this way would in turn require an explanation of its own. In order to exclude that possibility, the substance must be such that it is impervious to causal influence from without. It is such if it is causally isolated from other substances (P4) as well as if it is absolutely infinite.

A thing that is infinite in this way is also *supremely perfect* (1p11d). To be infinite, to equal the totality, to be impermeable to causal influence from without and to be supremely perfect appear to be co-extensive notions in Spinozism.\(^\text{130}\)

While God’s impermeability to external influence appears to be deducible from

\(^{130}\) Lin (2010, p. 282), drawing on Curley’s and Normore’s research on Descartes, has emphasized how intimately reality and causal independence are related in Spinoza’s thought.
the PSR, the definition of absolute infinity as existence under all conceivable attributes appears not to be so deducible. Perhaps it is because the PSR alone cannot afford the definition of God as absolutely infinite that Spinoza does not base his demonstration of God’s necessary existence on the PSR alone. One may wish to object that ultimately the definition of absolute infinity is in fact an immediate consequence of the PSR.\textsuperscript{131} In this chapter, I will not argue directly against this possibility: that is, I will not show that such a grounding (of absolute infinity in the PSR) is impossible. Instead, I intend to show that Spinoza’s theology, and not his metaphysical rationalism, carries the heavy weight in his account of transcendental perfection.

5.2. The grounding of necessitarianism in the PSR.

There are two routes leading to necessitarianism available to Spinoza. One goes from the PSR straight to necessitarianism, the other via characterizations of God’s nature. In this chapter, I will suggest that the grounding of necessitarianism in God’s absolute infinity and supreme perfection is of most relevance for Spinoza’s theory of perfection, and, as a consequence, for his ethics. Let me first briefly introduce the familiar grounding of necessitarianism in the PSR.

Many philosophers have noted that it seems nearly impossible to embrace the PSR without, as a side-effect, getting necessitarianism. The most influential derivation of necessitarianism from the PSR is due to Peter van Inwagen (1983, pp. 203-4).\textsuperscript{132} His argument as to why the PSR leads to the “collapse of all modal distinctions” is the following. P1. Assume the PSR. P2. Assume that there are contingent truths. P3. There is then a conjunction of all contingent truths. C1. There is then a sufficient reason for this conjunction (from P1 and P3). P4. That reason is either necessary or contingent. P5. A contingent truth cannot be the sufficient reason for itself. C2. The sufficient reason for the conjunction of

\textsuperscript{131} In this metaphysically rationalist vein, Lin (2012) has argued that although Spinoza’s demonstration of necessitarianism in 1p28d is theocentric on the surface, several of the premises in that argument are actually consequences of the PSR.

\textsuperscript{132} Dasgupta (2016, p. 395) presents a version of the PSR according to which it just is a restatement of a necessitarian position.
contingent truths cannot be contingent, for then it is a conjunct in said conjunction, and would have to be the sufficient reason for itself (contradicts P5). C3. The sufficient reason for the conjunction of contingent truths cannot be necessary, because if the sufficient reason for the conjunction of all contingent truths is necessary, then these truths must be necessary too (contradicts P2). C4. The conclusion to be drawn from this impasse is that one cannot entertain the view that there is something such as the conjunction of all contingent truths if one endorses the PSR. Inwagen takes this to mean that unless we are willing to abandon our impression that things could have been different, we are to reject the PSR. He chooses to marshal this argument against the plausibility of the PSR. The argument has been attacked on many accounts unrelated to P1. I will not discuss its soundness here - but it may be surmised that P3 is the premise most vulnerable to attack. Let me instead point out the general strategy. Inwagen’s

---

133 Inwagen’s reason as to why the conjunction cannot be contingent is slightly more elaborate than stated here. It reads: “It cannot be contingent, for if it were contingent, it would be a conjunct of P; and if it were a conjunct of P it would be entailed by P; and if it were entailed by P it would both entail and be entailed by P; and if it both entailed and were entailed by P, it would be P […] and if S were P, then a contingent states of affairs would be its own sufficient reason, contrary to our second principle” (1983, p. 203).

134 Allow me to mention a few objections here.

Levey (2016) says that the assumption to be rejected, is that there is such a thing as all contingent truths, independently of whether there is a conjunction of them or not. Levey instead proposes to construe contingent truth as an indefinitely extendible notion and proposes a rationalism with a “tincture” of constructivism. Levey’s solution is ingenious but one is left doubting whether things such as facts can be modeled after constructivist solutions that deal with abstracta such as sets without positing that there is such a thing as their totality. We can grant that some notions are extendible in the sense that they can be conjured forth when we need them, without therefore enjoying independent existence when the notions in question are formally constructed, such as mathematical ones. But can reality really behave like this? Must not the contingent truths in which other contingent truths are grounded enjoy some form of more solid being? Leaving this philosophical issue aside, in the context of Spinoza’s philosophy, there is clearly such a thing as the totality of all apparently contingent, finite things (which Spinoza describes as the face of the whole universe). (Levey admittedly discusses how we can generalize about concepts that are indefinitely extendible in some ontologically non-committed way (see pp. 426-7), but for Spinoza the generalization in question is not ontologically neutral in this way.) Another path (mentioned by Levey but considered less convincing by him) is to construe contingent truths as a kind of things that cannot be gathered into one conjunction at all, being too many. Tomaszeweski (2016, pp. 265-9) has made a diagonal argument to that effect.

The presupposition that explanations entail their explananda has been disputed by Pruss (2011), who points out that stochastic explanations do not entail their explananda, instead they only render the explananda more likely (pp. 230-4). This move is not open to Spinoza, however, for whom explanations clearly entail what they explain.
argument proceeds by first isolating, on the one side, all truths that are not self-explanatory and, on the other side, the one truth which is self-explanatory. That truth should be self-explanatory, for otherwise it would be a member of that which is it supposed to explain, and it is supposed to explain the existence of what is not self-explanatory. The problem is that once its existence is assumed to be self-explanatory and so necessary, it as it were infects the supposedly contingent side with its necessity. For how can something which ultimately depends on something necessary be contingent?

Spinoza, as mentioned, prefers to speak of things rather than truths. But he was clearly aware of this kind of argument (albeit perhaps not in this sharp articulation). First it is to be recalled that causes are for Spinoza sufficient reasons. In the chapter of the KV entitled “Of God’s predestination” (KV, I, VI), Spinoza asks whether there could be a series of contingently-existing causes (where the causes nonetheless necessarily bring about their effects).135 If something is contingent because its reason is contingent, the totality of such things would have to depend on a reason that is itself contingent. However, Spinoza thinks that the sole cause on which all things depend is necessary, and so that cannot be the case (C. 86). The reason why the ultimate reason cannot be contingent is implicitly afforded by the PSR. Although Spinoza does not articulate all the steps in the argument, in the KV, he, like Inwagen, reaches

Of course, the only thing that matters in this argument is not the plausibility of the premises but also the question of what exactly a sufficient reason is. Dasgupta’s take on the PSR - according to which it is the principle that “for every substantive fact Y there are some facts, the Xs, such that (i) the Xs ground Y and (ii) each one of the Xs is autonomous” - as well his view that essentialist facts are autonomous, are interesting philosophical claims in their own right. If we construe a sufficient reason as a ground, Dasgupta argues, we cannot infer from the fact that there is a sufficient reason for the whole conjunction that this reason is also a sufficient reason for each conjunct in the conjunction (2016, pp. 392-3). Dasgupta provides a simple example: “if A&B, then A and B together ground A&B. But clearly one may hold this plausible view without holding that A and B together ground A. One might for example hold that A and B are each groundless and yet also hold that they together ground A&B.” However, to Spinoza, I take it, the inference from the existence of a sufficient reason for the conjunction to the the conclusion that there be a sufficient reason for each conjunct is not at all problematic. On his view, to the extent that there is a reason for the whole series of things, that reason is also, ultimately, the reason for the existence of each member in the series.

135 Spinoza calls this contingency in a divided sense. Contingency in a composite sense would obtain among a series of causes that necessarily exist but are contingently causes (C. 85).
necessitarianism by dividing reality into those things for whose existence there is
supposed to be a sufficient reason and that which is supposed to act as the
ultimate sufficient reason.

5.3. The grounding of necessitarianism in divine infinity and perfection.

Above, we saw that the route leading directly to necessitarianism from the PSR
should have been available to Spinoza. Generally, however, he reaches
necessitarianism via a different route. He reaches that view by extracting it from
some specific characteristics of the ultimate sufficient reason, and more
specifically, from the perfection and infinity of God. The fact that there exist two
alternative methods for establishing necessitarianism is noteworthy for systematic
reasons. Their coexistence may be one of the interesting cases where two
priorities of Spinoza’s collide: one being the PSR, the other being what Melamed
(2013a: xvii) has described as “the priority of the infinite” - in other words,
Spinoza’s insistence on the absolute infinity of God. The result is not an internal
inconsistency but that one theory (necessitarianism) is embraced for what appears
to be two different, and severally sufficient, reasons. Importantly, although
necessitarianism is deducible from both, in his entire body of work Spinoza
appeals mainly to the grounding of necessitarianism in God’s nature. I will
suggest below that the reason why he does so is founded on his ethics. But since I
have not previously introduced the equivalence between supreme perfection and
absolute infinity, allow me to first do that at some length here.

I would like to suggest that by defining God as an absolutely infinite being,
Spinoza doesn’t wish to supplant the understanding of God as a most perfect
being (to which he subscribed), but rather to define God more rigorously by
pointing out what exactly supreme perfection involves. Spinoza’s definition of
God with an infinite being was not new. Indeed, one of Spinoza’s immediate
predecessors, Descartes, embraced a notion of God as a supremely perfect and
infinite being (AT VII 46; AT IX 36) in his demonstration of God’s existence.136

---

136 As Koyré points out in his survey of the early modern period, Descartes, as his corre-
spondence with Henry More testifies, went so far in attributing infinity to God that he
That Spinoza’s definition does not contradict the traditional definition of God as a perfect being is evident from the fact that Spinoza takes his definition to imply the traditional one.

In the *Ethics*, divine perfection is first introduced casually, in the second alternative proof for God’s necessary existence surveyed above (1p11d). As we saw in the previous section, Spinoza hypothesizes that if there were a cause which could prevent the divine nature from existing, it would have to be located either within or without this nature. In arguing against the first alternative, Spinoza wrote: “But it is absurd to affirm […] of a Being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect [that its nature could be such that it could prevent it from existing]”. Since divine perfection has previously not been discussed, Spinoza is assuming that his readers can see on their own why an absolutely infinite being also deserves to be called supremely perfect.¹³⁷ We are thus to find justification for the deducibility of supreme perfection from absolute infinity in the passages that precede this demonstration.

Spinoza identifies perfection with reality in 1p11s. In the light of the equivalence between perfection and reality, we can see why these two notions of absolute infinity and supreme perfection are also equivalent. It is 1p10s that allows us to make this connection, because here Spinoza specifies more in detail what maximal reality/perfection consists in. The relevant passage from this scholium reads:

> The more reality, or being, [each being] has the more it has attributes which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity. And consequently, there is also nothing clearer than that a being

considered this attribute to be the prerogative of God, refusing to call space anything but indefinite. Koyré (1957, p. 124) also emphasizes the roots of Descartes’s view in tradition: “Infinity, indeed, had always been the essential character, or attribute, of God; especially since Duns Scotus, who could accept the famous Anselmian a priori proof of the existence of God (a proof revived by Descartes) only after he had ‘colored’ it by substituting the concept of an infinite being (ens infinitum) for the Anselmian concept of ens maius cogitari nequit”. For further discussion of the Scholastic roots of Descartes’ view, see Agostini (2018).

¹³⁷ See also 2p34. The link between infinity and perfection surfaces in previous texts too. See for instance CM II: III (C. 319): “So only God is to be called absolutely infinite, insofar as we find that he really consists of infinite perfection.”
absolutely infinite must be defined as a being that consists of infinite attributes, each of which expresses a certain eternal and infinite essence (1p10s).

One’s degree of perfection/reality is directly proportional to the amount and quality of the attributes one possesses. Therefore, a being that is most real, and accordingly most perfect, must possess infinite and eternal attributes. But a being that possesses such attributes is by definition absolutely infinite (1d6). This should suffice to explain how the notions are related.

Let me now turn to a couple of passages where Spinoza deduces necessitarianism from God’s absolute infinity/supreme perfection. It is to be noted that this exposition is not meant to be exhaustive; my intention is only to point at a pattern in Spinoza’s reasoning about the source of the necessity of things.

In the KV Spinoza first suggests that God could not have done things differently since he is perfect (KV, I, IV, C. 81). The same reasoning recurs in the Ethics. Spinoza appears to consider himself as having established the necessary being of things in 1p16. This is indicated by the way he comments on that proposition in 1p17s:

I think I have shown clearly enough (see P16) that from God’s supreme power, or infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things have necessarily flowed, or always follow, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles.

In 1p16 Spinoza claims that from the necessity of the divine nature all things follow. In 1p17s, he claims to have shown in 1p16 that from God’s infinite nature all things follow with the same necessity as from the nature of a triangle it follows that the sum of its interior angles is 180. Since God’s existence and nature are one (1p20), to follow from the necessity of God is to follow from his necessary existence, viz. his necessary nature. The geometrical property of the triangle follows (on the premise that there are no non-Euclidean geometries, which I will here will grant Spinoza) from the nature of the triangle, because it is not possible for there to be a triangle without this property. In 1p17s Spinoza claims that all things follow from God in the same way as the essential property of a triangle is
instantiated whenever a triangle exists. However we are exactly to understand the force by which God’s essence causes its own properties,\textsuperscript{138} there simply cannot be God’s essence without there being all things. But since God exists necessarily, all things are necessary too. It should not be surprising, then, that most interpreters consider 1p16 to be an expression of a kind of mode necessitarianism.

As previously discussed (in Chapter 4), Spinoza is committed to the view that \textit{infinite things} follow in this way from God’s nature. (Previously, I called this view Plenitude.) If God did not produce something because of some external reason, he could apparently not be absolutely infinite/supremely perfect. In addition, Spinoza denies that there can be some thing that such a supremely perfect thing can bring forth and yet does not bring forth (see for instance KV, I, IV, C. 81-4). But why could not an attribute be self-limiting and result in less being than it has the power to produce? This is not so much a consequence of the fact that God’s nature is absolutely infinite, as a consequence of the very fact that it is a nature in the first place.

For Spinoza, natures or essences are self-affirming (consult the demonstration of 3p4d). Differently put, things cannot on their own accord abstain from causing their essential effects. Spinoza’s view has the remarkable consequence that individuals can never be compelled to self-destruction by their essences (see 4p20s). Spinoza’s claim is not only that nothing can be caused by its essence to go out of existence: his claim is, more precisely, that no essence can even compel the thing whose essence it is to pursue this goal. This seems to be a very strong assumption. It is not hard to think of counter-cases.

According to Freud, the instinct to die is wired into the human psyche. In \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, Freud stated this rather rhetorically in the following way: “If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons - becomes inorganic once again, then we shall be compelled to say that ‘the aim of all life is death’.”\textsuperscript{139} Death ultimately comes to all of us, if not

\textsuperscript{138} For an in depth reading of this difficult issue, see Viljanen (2011).

\textsuperscript{139} Cited from Bostridge (2015, p. 114).
violently so because of the decay of our bodies. This biological reality is reflected in our subconscious in such a way that we anticipate death by longing for it. Of course, that psychological theory does not come equipped with predictions about how humans (or their counterparts) behave in other possible worlds. But one can at least think of a creature that is essentially such that it pursues its own destruction. A world in which things essentially pursue their own destruction is a counterexample to Spinoza’s world, where nothing can seek its own destruction on the basis of its essence. So why did Spinoza hold it to be impossible for a thing to be such that it was essentially geared toward self-destruction?¹⁴⁰

Lin provides a fast demystification of Spinoza’s view on self-affirmative essences. He interprets Spinoza’s talk of self-contradictory essences as meaning essences whose instantiation would entail a contradiction. If there were an essence which prevented itself from existing, its instantiation would entail that it both existed and not existed. Thus, according to Lin (2007, p. 277), the notion of a non-self-affirmative essences is ruled out. Because of the distinction made previously, between the formal being of all conceivable things in some attribute of God and the existence of things such as ourselves, Lin’s view would have to be slightly modified to fit my account. What is ruled out by things with self-contradictory essential definitions is, strictly speaking, conceivability. This in turn requires being as a formal essence in some attribute of God, for there to be something there

¹⁴⁰ The impossibility of essential self-destruction is a topic that has been much debated in the literature, especially since Spinoza’s view seems to run counter to the intuition that it is possible for some of the individuals who pursue death and destruction to do so out of the core of their essences. Differently put, it is hard to imagine which situation is ruled out by Spinoza’s ban, since whether individuals self-destruct as a result of their essences or as a result of external factors is not in any way testable. There is also a problem of the consistency of Spinoza’s view, which, however, to me appears less severe than the above-stated problem (which concerns its plausibility). For, in spite of his claim that essential self-destruction is impossible, Spinoza nonetheless maintains that “the free man” (homo liber) would rather destroy himself than be insincere (4p72d). It appears that it is indeed an essential feature of the free man’s (his decency) that would compel him to self-destruct rather than to be insincere. Many readings have been proposed to mitigate this apparent contradiction by arguing that one’s “true” self is not destroyed by the destruction of one’s “mundane existence”. See for instance Lebuffe (2005, p. 246), who construes the being 3p9d speaks of as merely mundane existence, Don Garrett (1996), Delahunty (1985, p. 227) and most recently Nadler (2016). I agree with Nadler that the solution to this dilemma consists in interpreting the conatus as striving not after mere durational existence but after timeless perfection or reality.
for us to conceive. Since one cannot exist unless one is conceivable, however, inconceivability also rules out existence.

Let me sum up the major upshot of this section. In 1p17s and elsewhere, Spinoza takes the route that goes via some property which the necessarily existing thing must possess - absolute infinity - and infers from that property the necessary being of things. In an earlier text (the KV) he avails himself of a shorter route, reaching necessitarianism by the PSR.

There are thus two routes leading to necessitarianism. Some interpreters may wish to object that the route leading from divine infinity and perfection is reducible to the one leading from the PSR to necessitarianism, as divine infinity and perfection (on this reading) are themselves consequences of the PSR. But even granting that there is such an alternative, and shorter way, to necessitarianism one may still want to ask why Spinoza in the Ethics chooses to go via his characterization of the divine nature. In what follows, I intend to supply an answer to this question. In order to do so, let me now turn to the last relation of grounding.

5.4. Necessitarianism grounding the perfection of things.

In 1app, G. II/80, Spinoza makes a striking assertion. He says that he has sufficiently shown that…

… Nature has no end set before it and that all final causes are nothing by human fictions. For I believe I have already sufficiently established it, both by the foundations and causes from which I have shown this prejudice to have had its origin, and also by 1p16, 1p32c1 and c2, and all those [propositions] by which I have shown that all things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature, and with the greatest perfection.

Things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature and with the greatest perfection. How are these claims related? Is there a hierarchy among them, such that things either follow necessarily because they do so with the greatest perfection, or follow with the greatest perfection because they do so necessarily? Or is there no hierarchy between the two claims?
Spinoza had explicitly answered this question before the appendix, in 1p33s2, which I have cited earlier. 1p33 states that not only are the things that follow from God necessary, but also the causal sequence in which they follow from God is necessary and could not have been any different. Let me once more cite this crucial scholium:

From the preceding [viz. from the necessity of things and the necessity of their causal order] it clearly follows that things have been produced by God with the highest perfection, *since* [quandoquidem] they have followed necessarily from a given most perfect nature (Emphasis added).

It is worth noting that while the English translation admits of the possibility that things may follow from God’s nature perfectly without therefore themselves being perfect, the position of *summa perfectione* (much closer to *res* than to the predicate) makes a reading on which the things that follow from God are *themselves* characterized by the perfection more natural.\(^{141}\) That it is indeed the case that things are perfect because they follow necessarily from God and they do so because God is perfect is supported by other passages where Spinoza indicates this. Consider, for example, Spinoza’s claim that necessitarianism eliminates imperfection in 4app (C. 544):

We see, therefore, that men are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from true knowledge of these things. For we have shown in the Appendix of Part I that Nature does nothing on account of an end. That eternal and infinite being we call God or Nature acts from the same necessity from which he exists.

Imperfection is eliminated by substance necessitarianism and substance necessitarianism holds because of the way the substance acts, not on account of itself, but internally necessitated by its own absolutely infinite nature.\(^{142}\) Spinoza’s reasoning is both interesting and hard to follow.

---

\(^{141}\) This is not to be taken as an argument that things do not also follow from God in a perfect way. The passage just cited from 1app indicates that they do, for in that passage the phrase ‘with the greatest perfection’ is adverbial.

\(^{142}\) Consider also KV, II, 18 (C. 127), where “our greatest perfection” is explicitly described as necessarily being slaves of God.
First of all, one is entitled to ask why essential properties must share in the quality of the essence. It is God’s nature that is absolutely infinite and so supremely perfect. Why should properties that necessarily follow from it also be perfect? An example can illustrate that we have reason to doubt Spinoza’s reasoning here. Let us assume that A is an agent that from his essence brings about a certain effect. Perhaps A is a mind and let us stipulate that it is essential to minds that they be thinking. Then whenever A exists, A necessarily brings forth thoughts. But are his thoughts themselves thinking? This does not follow.

Spinoza’s reasoning here is thus not self-evident. There are (at least) two ways of interpreting Spinoza’s claim that the perfection of things stems from their property of following necessarily from God. I hope to be able to show that the fastest way is in this case not the best one.

Spinoza could be interpreted as asserting the hollow thought that because this is the only possible set of things, it is also the most possibly perfect set of things. This suggestion is due to Koistinen, who suggests that “[b]ecause the actual world is the only possible world, there is no doubt that the actual world is the most perfect world” (2003, p. 295). The same reasoning leads to this being the most possibly awkward and ballerina-like, and even imperfect, set of things, none of which is of any interest for Spinoza. But Spinoza is genuinely interested in perfection. Supreme perfection is, as we have seen, equivalent with absolute infinity. It is also how we define God essentially. Perfection is an essential property of God’s, not some random output yielded by inputting perfect for F in the schema ‘the only possible x is most possibly F’. To be clear, the suggestion that God is most perfect in the domain quantified over since he is alone in that domain is not mistaken, merely incomplete. It is incomplete, because while things are perfect because they are necessitated, they are not perfect merely because they are necessitated. According to Spinoza’s most important reasoning in favour of necessitarianism in the Ethics surveyed in the previous section, things are necessitated because God is absolutely infinite and supremely perfect. And God is essentially perfect in this way, and thus perfect in a sense entirely different from the empty sense in which he is the most ballerina-like among all substances.
I would like to suggest that if one pursues the other route to necessitarianism - the one that goes via the PSR - the perfection of things is lost or at least obscured. Of course, modes will retain their necessity when they are necessarily possessed by a necessary being. But unless that being is supremely perfect, they will not retain their perfection. At least we could not then come to know their perfection by deducing it from the supremely perfect being. In Chapter 1 I argued that perfection can be construed a transcendental property since historically such properties were exactly those that were thought to be true of all being in virtue of being first and foremost true of a being that instantiated that property in a supreme way: God. Of course, to merely name properties that behave in this way ‘transcendental' does not explain why they behave in this way. Why is perfection transcendental?

In scholastic accounts of the transcendental good, things are good because they stand in the relation of created to their creator - God. By comparison, on Spinoza’s view, the grounding of the perfection of things in the perfection of God is more intimate. For on Spinoza’s view, God is not external to the things that he produces. Things produced by God simply are God modified as those things. Does that mean that those things are also predicable of God? I will not here discuss whether finite things and all of their properties can, as a matter of fact, be predicated of God. What is important for present purposes is that all their reality, or ontological perfection, can be so predicated. We can call this thesis perfection monism.

On my reading, perfection is a transcendental property in Spinoza’s metaphysics - a property enjoyed by all that is to the extent that it is - for the reason that all being enjoyed by things is God’s being and God is supremely perfect. Of course, the distinction between existence and being poses a problem for this transcendental reading of Spinoza. Does perfection accrue only to one of these or to both? I think it is clear that for Spinoza, all being is perfection, regardless of whether it also exists or not. The question of which mode of being - existence or mere being - is more perfect is thornier. On the one hand, we can only claim to know what causation of effects means in the realm of existence. Since causation
of effects is, for Spinoza, co-extensional with perfection, it is tempting to read him as if this kind of causation is the only one that is perfect. On the other hand, Spinoza, in (Iapp G. II/80) appears to think of perfection as obtaining more the “closer” things are to God, i.e., the more they are directly caused by him and without mediating causes. For here he writes “that effect is most perfect which is produced immediately by God, and the more something requires intermediate causes to produce it, the more imperfect it is.” But it seems that things that exist are exactly the ones that require intermediate causes, whereas that which merely is does not. For example, in demonstrating the eternity of the human mind (5p23d) Spinoza relies on the essence of the human mind being as it were directly involved in an attribute of God. (It must be directly involved in such an attribute in order for there to be an object of the idea God has of that essence. See 1p17s: veritas et formalis rerum essentia ideo talis est quia talis in Dei intellectu existit objective.) Since, in brief, Spinoza appears to think that things are more imperfect the more they rely upon causes instilling themselves between the effect and God tout court (i.e. God as he is absolutely), and since this is corroborated by him locating the eternity of the mind in its formal essence rather than in this essence being instantiated in existence, we should abstain from construing perfection as reserved for what exists. Nonetheless it must be maintained that the perfection of existents consists in the production of effects that likewise exist.

The difference between Koistinen’s reading and the transcendental one I here propose is that while Koistinen’s reading says that everything is most perfect because nothing could have been any different, my reading says that everything is most perfect because nothing could have been any different and the reason that nothing could have been any different is that God is perfect. I am not being difficult about this, since the grounding of necessitarianism in divine perfection or infinity is important for ethical reasons. To these reasons I now turn.
5.5. Perfectionism.

5.5.1. Plausibility.

I have suggested that for Spinoza, the perfection of the substance bleeds through to its modes. For that reason, perfection is a transcendental property: it belongs to anything that is, insofar as it is, and it does so because it belongs in the first place to God. But what is the status of this perfection? It is evidently ontological, coextensive with reality. In addition, I suggest, contrary to a widespread assumption, that this ontological perfection is not axiologically neutral. In addition to being reality, it is also valuable. But how can something be valuable just in virtue of its sheer being? It may be objected that this perfection is purely metaphysical, that is has absolutely nothing to do with perfection as we normally understand that concept.

Here, the parallel with the transcendental thought of the medievals is illuminating. Perhaps we usually think of goodness as consisting in something which has nothing to do with the way God is. Perhaps, for example, we think of it as obtaining only when people gratuitously shower us with gifts. But then our understanding of what goodness really is is mistaken and we better acquire a different approach to that concept. Real or prototypical goodness is the one God possesses. For this reason, our attitude to God and to creation will be transformed when we conceptualize goodness truly as the goodness of God, for this will allow us to realize that creation participates in his goodness. Likewise, I suggest, Spinoza’s proposal is not that we quarantine perfection within the metaphysical realm. On the contrary, metaphysical perfection is existentially relevant for Spinoza in that it can become the standard by which we evaluate things. When we proceed to judge the perfection of things by the perfection they possess insofar as they are, our evaluations are descriptive: they pick out an objective property of things. Not so when we judge things in the teleological manner. My proposal is thus that Spinoza’s program for human perfectionism consists in a reform of our very concept of perfection. Only by reevaluating what perfection means will one be able to truly acquire it.
But, it may be objected, perfection is an ethical concept. And ethics is about what humans ought to do. But necessitarianism leads to the filling in of the fact/value gap, and the concept of what one ought to do cannot exist unless this gap remains intact. The familiar thought behind this reasoning is that it makes no sense to speak of what we ought to do unless we can do otherwise. The notion of what one ought to do is obliterated by the denial of contingency. Endorsing a view on which all things are (metaphysically) necessary leads to a conceptualization of reality as a dense bloc in which no space can be carved for the exertion of human freedom or the fulfilment of human duty. Nothing can then be valuable in the sense that it could serve as a motivating factor for us to do what we would otherwise not have done. The bonds between values and action is severed and the notion of values as motivators destroyed. This thread of thought has been convincingly put forth by by Omri Boehm (2016). He uses the collapse of what is with what should be as an argument against metaphysical rationalism (as the PSR leads to necessitarianism).143 It is, on Boehm’s account, worth giving up on that doctrine, in order to preserve intact the gulf between what is and what should be, so that we can retain (or conceive ourselves as retaining) our capacity to influence what is in the direction of what should be. (It is to be noted that the normativity Boehm is attempting to safeguard is directive rather than evaluative. But one central aspect of my interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of human perfection is that evaluative normativity is of greater import for human perfection than its directive counterpart.)

Boehm is right that, in one way or another, metaphysical rationalism entails the collapse of what is with what should be and, to the extent that ethics is erected on the fundament of what one ought to do, the collapse of ethics and metaphysics. The question is how one is to interpret this collapse. Either one may think that the ought is obliterated by the is, or more generally speaking, that the realm of value is swallowed up by the realm of facts. This is the interpretative path chosen by Boehm. Alternatively, however, one may think that of what should be as suffusing what is, as (always already) perfecting what is from within. Then one conceives of

---

143 Boehm is by no means the first to point this out. Incompatibilists tend to agree. For example, van Inwagen likewise construes determinism as the destruction of freedom and moral responsibility (1984).
things inevitably being the way they should be. In order to face this inevitable perfection of being one must give up on other ideas of perfection (for Spinoza, 
universals) that one holds dear: the perfection of beauty, the perfection of personal triumph, and so on. (Of course, in coming to value them as ontologically perfect one will estimate them nonetheless, but one will not estimate the value that they represent, but merely the fact that they are.) For this view commits one to value reality at all costs. I think it is because this picture of perfection is so strange and perhaps even terrifying that it has not been taken seriously in Spinoza studies. That does not mean that the idea has never entered the scene of human thought. Let me briefly mention two theoretically related accounts.

I could not be without being myself. If I had been someone else, I would not, tautologously, have been me at all. Clearly, this contrafactual scenario isn’t coherent. But it appears that there are some properties - a certain restlessness, say - that I could have been, and perhaps would have been better off, without. Which are those properties? On a view commonly known as superessentialism, none. This view is often associated with Leibniz.¹⁴⁴ In his intriguing text Confessio Philosophi, the fact that I could not have been without sinning and thus being condemned makes the question: “Why did God not create me such that I did not sin and as a consequence was not condemned?” meaningless. Had God created such a creature, that creature would not have been me. So, this question which on Leibniz’s view lies at the root of our dissatisfaction (“Why, God, did you not create me differently?”) cannot even be consistently raised.¹⁴⁵

For Spinoza necessitarianism holds since God could not have done anything differently. This entails, of course, that God could not have produced me by any other means than he actually did (and continuously does) produce me: “Things

¹⁴⁴ See Mondadori (1985).
¹⁴⁵ Leibniz (2005, p. 81): “You have persuaded me that no pretext for excusing the damned remains, nor do they have any reason for complaint. Nevertheless, they have reason to be indignant, or, more exactly, they have reason to complain, but they do not have anything to complain about [Emphasis added].”

But would it not then have been better for me not to have existed at all? My conjecture is that this option would have been vehemently opposed by Spinoza and Leibniz alike, on the basis of their alignment with value and being.

159
could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced” (1p33). In order for me to be produced in a different way - say, without the sense of sadness, the anticipation of loss, that accompanies my inborn restlessness - God would have to be different. I am what I am because God is the way he is. The Spinozist subject is thus no more entitled to the question: “Why, God, do I not exist differently?” than the Leibnizian subject. In this way, Spinoza, on my reading, shields God from the complaints creatures may raise against him. Necessitarianism about the manner in which finite things exist, like superessentialism, operates a kind of theodicy. For Spinoza thinks that the perfection of all that is is a consequence of its being necessarily produced.

The justification of all that is, I have suggested, takes place by the elevation of all to the status of perfection. But this elevation is accomplished only by replacing one’s teleological notion of perfection with an ontological one. In this regard, there is a striking resemblance between Spinoza’s thought and philosophical tradition of the East. In Zen Buddhism, one must annihilate one's desires in order to enter nirvana. A logical consequence of this is that one must annihilate the desire after nirvana that motivates one to embrace Buddhism. Nirvana can only be attained when the difference between samsara and nirvana is no longer recognizable. Although this is a matter of my personal interpretation and a view that has in no way received consensus, nirvana may even be a state in which one has given up on the distinction between samsara and nirvana.146 Likewise, for Spinoza, human perfection is only attainable when one realizes that everything is

---

146 The identity of nirvana and samsara is expressed most forcefully in Nagarjuna in *Mula-madhyakarika* (1993, p. 59). Recently, however, Richard H. Jones (2018, p. 59) has objected that Nagarjuna’s explicit statements here don’t add up to this claim: “Nagarjuna does not state that nirvana and samsara are the same or identical, but only that they are not different in any way”. On Jones’ interpretation, the relations of sameness and difference can be predicated only of things that have their own nature (svabhava), which, of course, Nagarjuna denies that anything has. Being empty of their own natures, it does not make sense to say that nirvana and samsara are either different or the same. But difference and sameness can nonetheless both be negated of them, perhaps in a way analogous to the way having color and lacking color can both be denied of a non-existing thing (unless one adopts Meinongianism or non-ism - the doctrine which denies that only what exists can have true properties). On Jones’ reading, Nagarjuna could equally well have said that nirvana and samsara are not the same. But he didn’t, and the fact that he didn’t is important. As far as I can see, Jones’ reading lacks the resources to explain why Nagarjuna prioritizes the rejection of their difference over the rejection of their sameness.
already, insofar as it is, perfect. The attainment of perfection is, seemingly paradoxically, predicated on one’s abandonment of a familiar, but misleading, concept of perfection.

Strange as it may be, this picture of perfection is thus not entirely unique. Admittedly, however, there is another challenge to this picture, based not on its theoretical implausibility but on its impracticability. To that topic I now turn.

5.5.2. Practicability.

As we have seen, the metaphysical route goes from the absolutely infinite being, via necessitarianism, to the perfection of things. In addition, it is possible to establish necessitarianism on the fundament of the PSR alone, but a necessitarianism which does not substantially draw on the infinity and perfection of God will not lead to the transcendental perfection of things. It should be mentioned that it may be possible to ground the absolute infinity of God in the PSR - a topic tangential to my concerns in this chapter. (Even if absolute infinity is ultimately deducible from the PSR, this does not alter what I have argued for in this chapter - namely that the transcendental perfection of things is deducible from necessitarianism only on the basis of the absolute infinity and supreme perfection of God.)

As far as Spinoza’s practical philosophy of human perfection is concerned, my suggestion is that it exactly tracks this metaphysical route. Human perfection consists, on my reading of Spinoza, in acknowledging the perfection of what is, in intellectually aligning what is with what should be. However, in order to distinguish between what sense of perfection I am discussing - the perfection of consciously recognized ontological perfection and ontological perfection tout court - I will invoke a distinction previously made (see Chapter 3), namely the one between ontological and speculative perfection. Not all ontological perfection is speculative to a non-divine mind M, because not all ontological perfection is recognized as such by M. We can become speculatively perfect by realizing the perfection of things. But importantly, we can realize the perfection of things only by deducing it from God’s nature.
I believe that it is for this reason that Spinoza’s proofs of necessitarianism appeal to God’s infinity/perfection instead of to the PSR. Transcendental perfection is the enjoyment of necessary being as a consequence of being produced by a supremely perfect being. Only by learning how to root the being of things in God can we learn to discern the perfection they truly possess, and thus become speculatively perfect. Hence, the kind of necessitarianism that Spinoza embraces is arguably not the same kind of necessitarianism that contemporary metaphysicians deduce from the PSR. Of course, in a way, it is exactly the same. But the kind of necessitarianism Spinoza espouses has an evaluative consequence which Inwagen’s necessitarianism lacks. For from necessitarianism, Spinoza infers the absence of any objective imperfection in things. And attending to their ontological perfection leads to the speculative perfection of the mind. And the speculative perfection of minds, is on my reading, at the heart of Spinoza’s practical philosophy.

Let me now specify the theoretical consequence that will be of interest to me in the subsequent parts of this thesis. It is because (a) Spinoza’s account of human perfection is speculative, and because (b) one will be able to establish the (ontological) perfection of things by deducing it from the divine essence only when one considers this essence to be infinite, that (c) the absolute infinity of the divine essence plays a significant role in Spinoza’s account of human perfection. Because it is only by conceiving God’s absolute infinity that one will be able to recognize the perfection of things and oneself in the manner that is necessary for one to become speculatively perfect. In what follows, I will show more concretely how conceiving of divine infinity differently will allow humans to become speculatively perfect.

In sum, human perfection consists, on my reading, in the speculative acknowledgment of the perfection of what is. For this reason, the three cases of increases in human perfection that I will discuss in the remaining Part of this thesis will not involve actively manipulating what is. Instead, it will involve contemplating reality differently and more specifically in such a way that its perfection emerges before the eyes of one’s consciousness. Such changes in one’s
way of regarding things can be called perspectival. Thus, the cases of increases in human perfection I discuss will each involve a perspectival shift. I will analyze three such shifts.
Part II: Human Perfection and the Optics of Salvation.
Chapter 6

Infinity in Spinoza’s Therapy of the Passions

Introduction.

In Part, I introduced Spinoza’s seemingly paradoxical view that humans can become more perfect by acknowledging the perfection that is necessarily theirs. The present chapter is devoted to one concrete application of this realization of necessity in the area of Spinoza’s cognitive therapy. In Chapter 5, I pointed out that Spinoza explicitly grounds necessitarianism not in the PSR but in the characterization of God as absolutely infinite. In this chapter I will discuss more in detail how one can conceive of things as necessary on the basis of that divine infinity, and how this realization of necessity is therapeutically efficacious in our combat against our passions.

In contrast to an influential philosophical tradition represented by his predecessor Descartes, Spinoza maintained that “the human Mind has adequate knowledge [cognitionem] of God’s eternal and infinite essence” (2p47). In a key definition at the outset of the Ethics, Spinoza defines God as “a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence” (1d6). Since God is essentially and not merely nominally defined in terms of his absolute infinity, knowledge of God necessarily involves knowledge of infinity. Spinoza therefore held that knowledge of infinity is possible for humans. Scholars have suggested different historical sources upon
which Spinoza may have drawn in making this crucial move, and thereby significantly clarified it.\footnote{147}

In this chapter I will not continue their research, but instead discuss Spinoza’s characteristic rehabilitation of the infinite as a possible object of knowledge in the context of his cognitive therapy, by which I will mean the “remedy for the affects which […] consists in true cognition of the affects” (5p4s). We acquire “clear and distinct understanding” (5p4s) of our passions by considering what causes them, or their intentional objects,\footnote{148} in new light. This is so since, according to Spinoza’s Causal Axiom, “the knowledge of an effect depends upon, and involves, the knowledge of the cause” (1a4). Only when we ascribe a different causal ancestry to our passion will we be able to conceive of the passion differently.

Edwin Curley has presented an account of how Spinoza intended this consideration of causes to function therapeutically. On his reading, Spinoza’s “cognitive therapy” consists in reconsidering the intentional object of a passion in its causal context. The passion, for example the hate I harbor toward any object X, is mitigated when I consider X to be caused by Y, which ideally redistributes some of my original hate toward X and makes Y fall victim of it instead. Curley admits that while this procedure may benefit my relationship with X, it may make it “harder for me to deal with Y in a constructive way” (1988, 133-4).\footnote{149} But thus

\footnote{147} While Arview (1990) explores Spinoza’s notion of the actually infinite in the light of 14th century scholastic accounts of the categorematic infinite, Melamed (2014) does so in the light of Hasdai Crescas’ rejection of the Aristotelian argument against an actually infinite causal regress.

\footnote{148} For the sake of textual economy, the phrase “an idea of an affect/passion” can intend an idea of the intentional object of the affect/passion.

\footnote{149} Lin is critical of this model, which he states wrongly presupposes that any intentional affect “is a fixed quantity to be distributed among its causes” (2009, p. 281). Lin may be right; however, the example he supplies does not substantiate his case. According to Lin, if I learn that the poisoner of my dog had an accomplice, my original hate will not be divided between poisoner-1 and poisoner-2. Instead I will hate twice as much, since I will continue to hate poisoner-1, and come to hate poisoner-2 with the same intensity. Lin’s example fails to illustrate his point since poisoner-1 and poisoner-2 co-cause the death of my dog. Instead, we ought to consider a case where poisoner-1’s poisoning of my dog is caused by him being poisoned by poisoner-2 with a drug that causes one to compulsively poison dogs. In this case it does seem likely that at least some of my original hatred for poisoner-1 will be redistributed to poisoner-2.
conceiving of how the intentional object of each passion passes the buck to its cause does not seem to have any therapeutically liberating potential. For such regression in thought only benefits my relationship with X at the cost of disturbing my relationship with Y; it can never even principally “destroy” (5p4s) the passion of which X was the initial object. It can only attenuate this passion indefinitely.\(^{150}\) However, in his account Curley does not address the interpretative possibilities that arise when the causal ancestry behind the passion in question is seen as an actually infinite whole instead of as a potentially infinite regression. To do so will be my task in this chapter.

My thesis is, more precisely, that the notion of actual infinity is crucial for Spinoza’s cognitive therapy, since the agent engaged in therapy should proceed by regarding her passions or their intentional objects as necessary, and she can do so only when considering them as infinitely caused. My goals are, accordingly, first, to show the importance of necessity and freedom in Spinoza’s therapy of the affects. Second, I will relate how the notions of necessity, freedom and infinity are linked, on Spinoza’s view. Third, I will outline for the distinctions Spinoza draws between different perspectives on infinity. Fourth, I will relate these perspectives on infinity to Spinoza’s taxonomy of species of infinity in the *Ethics*. Hereby I will be able to briefly suggest one way in which we could conceive of the infinite causal ancestry of the finite modes that our passions intend. By completing these tasks, I hope I will be able to show the neglected significance the concept of infinity has in Spinoza’s therapy.\(^{151}\)

---

\(^{150}\) It would seem that Spinoza’s therapy operates by reducing the passion to an infinitesimal quantity. If that is so, then Spinoza in this way informally approaches a topic which commentators correctly interpret him as ignoring in its formal aspects. See for instance Brunschvig (1912), according to whom Spinoza’s lack of interest in calculus marks “the technical limit of Spinozism”.

\(^{151}\) Contemporary studies of Spinoza’s psychotherapy tend to neglect the notion of infinity. An exception is Ravven (2014) who addresses the existentially transformative aspect of acquiring a realization of the infinite network of causes in which agents are locked. While she compares Spinoza’s philosophy to that of Maimonides, I aim to identify the condition of possibility for this realization in Spinoza’s doctrine of the infinite.
6.1. The role of necessity in therapy.

By ‘affects’ Spinoza means what we today call emotions. Spinoza’s most fundamental distinction between kinds of affects is drawn between active affects and passions. Spinoza differentiates between active and passive affects in terms of the ideas that cause them: active affects “follow” from adequate ideas, whereas passions follow from inadequate ideas (3p3; see also 3p1c). Since affects, on this understanding, are characterized by the ideas that cause them, they are fundamentally cognitive; indeed, passions are once even referred to as inadequate ideas tout court (Gen. Def. Aff. exp.).

Commonly we lead lives dominated by the confused ideas of our passions - a condition which Spinoza calls slavery. To remedy this dismal condition, Spinoza, in the three last parts of his Ethics, formulates different strategies whereby our slavery to passions is to be undone. In 5p20s Spinoza lists five ways in which the Mind has “the power […] over the affects”. The first two both consist in knowledge of the affects and read: “I. In the knowledge itself of the affects (see P4S); [and] II. In the fact that [the Mind] separates the affects from the thought of an external cause, which we imagine confusedly (see P2 and P4S)”. Both I. and II. are founded on 5p4s, which implies that the empire of the passions can be swayed by us changing the way we think about our affects or their objects.152 Since coming to know one’s affect to be caused differently than one previously assumed is an instance of coming to know one’s affect, I. and II. are both ways in which “clear and distinct understanding” of affects is deployed therapeutically.153 In this chapter I will refer to the activity whereby we cure ourselves from passions by

---

152 Spinoza’s cognitive therapy has been widely criticized. Lin (2009, p. 271), who calls 5p3 “psychological alchemy” endorses Bennett’s criticism (1984, p. 336) that since we cannot change the causal history of an affect, we cannot convert a passion to an action. For a recent defense of the general plausibility of 5p3 against this objection (as well as against criticism from Della Rocca [2008a] and Curley [1988]) see Marshall (2012).

153 Throughout this chapter I speak, as Spinoza himself does in the bulk of the Ethics, as if we can acquire adequate ideas. However, Lebuffe (2010) has convincingly argued that since the deposit of adequate ideas is an eternal part of the mind, our adequate ideas cannot undergo any substantial change. Hence any improvement in our epistemic condition must consist in a decrease in our inadequate ideas in proportion to our adequate ideas. Although my interpretation is not incompatible with Lebuffe’s I will follow Spinoza’s manner of speaking here.
acquiring adequate ideas and/or discarding inadequate ideas about these passions as Spinoza’s cognitive therapy, or therapy, for short. I will not deal with the other strategies Spinoza mentions in 5p20 (which are not “derived” from 5p4).

One common charge against Spinoza’s cognitive therapy is its intellectualism. However, it is rarely noted that this therapy is subject to the Affective Force Condition of 4p7. 154 4p7 reads: “An affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger [fortior] than, the affect to be restrained” (see also 5p10d). This means that unless the adequate idea we form of a passion is accompanied by an affect “stronger” than the passion in question, the idea we have of the affect, no matter how adequate, will be inconsequential. Since ideas that cannot substantially transform our overall affective situation are therapeutically useless, we should strive to acquire ideas that are not only adequate but also affectively stronger than the passion to be outmaneuvered.

154 Bennett (1984, pp. 332-3) notes that 4p7 implies that unless the realization that, say, jealousy is irrational is accompanied by an affect, say, of disgust and shame, the realization of the irrationality of the affect will be therapeutically inconsequential, but dismisses this finding for the following reasons: 1) it sounds “unSpinozistic”; 2) it contradicts Spinoza’s dictum that “we shall determine by the mind’s cognition alone the remedies of the affects” (5Pref). 1) is no argument. As for 2), the passage from 5Pref need not be read as stating that affects can be cured only by the mind’s cognition - as this would contradict 4p7 and 5p10d - but could more charitably be read as stating that Spinoza will appreciate the efficaciousness of his therapy in mental and not physical terms. Similarly, Lin (2009, p. 387) does not construe 4p7 as a condition imposed on any restraint of affects, but merely as one way that affects may be restrained. By contrast, Lebuffé’s elucidation of “affective therapy” takes 4p7 very seriously (2010, p. 17). Interestingly, Nietzsche too seems to have observed, in a postcard to Overbeck from 1881, that in order for knowledge to be transformative for Spinoza, it has to become the most “powerful affect” (1967-).

It may be added that influential interpreters such as Curley (1988, p. 128) are critical of Nietzsche’s interpretation of Spinoza, since for Curley’s Spinoza knowledge is no affect. But, I think, since the mind’s power of acting consists in understanding, and since the affect of joy is nothing but the phenomenal aspect of an increase in power, any process of coming to understand must be accompanied by joy. This can be squared with Lebuffé’s observation that adequate ideas are eternal by drawing a line between the eternal presence of an adequate idea, on the one hand, and conscious knowledge of possessing the idea, on the other hand. That is, the joy (the transition in perfection) may result because we consciously come to know adequate ideas we already possess. Perhaps a criterion of force similar to 4p7 can even be applied to determine which ideas are conscious and which are not. Differently put, what decides whether an idea is conscious or not should be its force rather than its adequacy. But the force of an idea, unlike its adequacy, can fluctuate relative to that of other ideas one possesses.
What, then, makes affects relatively strong? Spinoza maintains the “anti-intellectualist” (or more accurately anti-evidentialist) psychological thesis that the hierarchy of strength among affects is not established on the basis of the veracity of the constituent ideas of the affects in question. For instance, an affect is not stronger because its constituent idea truthfully reports on what is evil or good (4p14d). While there may be many factors that determine the hierarchy of strength among affects, I will focus on the belief that Spinoza’s metaphysical system seems designed to engineer (see Chapter 4 and Discussion), namely that finite things are necessary. In 5p5, Spinoza most explicitly presents the modality we attribute to the intentional object of our affects as the basis on which the hierarchy of strength among affects is erected:

An affect toward a thing we imagine to be free is greater than that toward a necessary thing [erga necessariam sc. rem] (by IIP49), and consequently is still greater than that toward a thing we imagine as possible or contingent (by IVP11). But imagining a thing as free can be nothing but simply imagining it while we are ignorant of the causes by which it has been determined to act (by what we have shown in IIP35s). Therefore, an affect toward a thing we imagine simply is, other things equal, greater than that toward a necessary, possible, or contingent thing. Hence, it is greatest of all, q.e.d. (Translation modified.)

Spinoza does not specify how we are to define freedom in order to be maximally affected by things we consider free, nor does he give a philosophical account of the necessity we should attribute to things in order to be minimally affected by them. This omission shows that whether we conceptualize the freedom of a thing along lines sanctioned by Spinoza’s metaphysics (i.e. as self-causation: a freedom which God or Nature alone enjoys) or as the freedom he rejects (i.e. freedom of will) we will be equally affected by the object thus conceived, as long as we think of it “simply”, without the mediation of thoughts of other things (see also 3p49d).

Although freedom of will is on Spinoza’s view impossible, attribution of such freedom strengthens the passions we have toward creatures we wrongly consider

---

155 In this passage Curley twice makes necessariam the direct object of imaginamur. However, as 2p44 makes clear, we do not imagine things to be necessary, but understand them to be thus. Since it also not grammatically necessary to take necessariam as the direct object of this verb (the accusative can depend solely on erga), I have modified the translation.
free in this way.\textsuperscript{156} As a general rule, we can manipulate the differential strength of our affects by considering the object of the affect to be weakened as necessary and the object of the affect to be strengthened as free, regardless of whether we do so correctly or incorrectly.\textsuperscript{157}

Notably, however, Spinoza insists that his cognitive therapy must proceed by “actions of the mind” (5p4s), and such actions are \textit{adequate ideas}. 5p5 shows that one way in which this \textit{cognitive strategy} for combatting passions can meet the Affective Force Condition is to proceed (i) by replacing inadequate ideas of free objects by ideas in which these objects are adequately considered as necessary; and/or (ii) by forming opposite ideas of alternative objects adequately conceived of as free.\textsuperscript{158}

The criterion of adequacy inherent in Spinoza’s cognitive therapy redirects our focus from his account of the passions to his metaphysical story of the way things are. For if there is no agreement between the object and the way it is intended by the idea the idea cannot be true, and therefore not adequate, either (see 2p34-2p35).\textsuperscript{159} Let us next explore the relevant properties - free, contingent and necessary - in order to better understand how adequate understanding of them can be harnessed for Spinoza’s therapeutical purposes. Of course, we have encountered necessity and contingency previously (in Chapter 4), but not so in

\textsuperscript{156} The fatal consequences of our erroneous belief in freedom are described in 1app.
\textsuperscript{157} I cannot here discuss the plausibility of this psychological claim in abstraction from Spinoza’s overall philosophy. For a discussion, see Bennett (1984, pp. 337-45).
\textsuperscript{158} While Bennett (1984, pp. 335-42) and Lin (2009, pp. 270-2; pp. 279-82) take the “knowledge of the affects” to be one strategy whereby reason can overcome the affects, and “understanding things as necessary” to be another, thus construing them as two different strategies, I interpret them as one. This would help explain why Spinoza, as Bennett (1984, p. 337) and Lin (2009, p. 270) put it “oddly” passes over understanding things as necessary in his itemization of the powers reason has over the passions in 5p20s. Colin Marshall follows Bennett-Lin in taking “understanding [things] as necessary” as a separate method for passion-control, irrelevant to the strategy of 5p3. He motivates this with the omission of 5p4 in the derivation of 5p6 where Spinoza first mentions the benefits of understanding things as necessary (2012, p. 144, n. 15). However, this omission cannot undermine the validity of the Affective Force Condition.
\textsuperscript{159} Spinoza intentionally distinguishes between a true idea, defined in terms of agreement (in 1a6), and an adequate idea, defined in terms of its genesis in the mind alone (2p11c). However, he also maintains that the classes of adequate and true ideas are co-extensional (see Letter 60, C. 432).
connection with the slavery of human beings. It is therefore worthwhile to approach these concepts again, from an existential or practical point of view.

6.2. The role of infinity in necessity.

In the world (as opposed to in its distorted mirror image in our passions) Spinoza maintains that things are either “necessary in reason of their cause” or “necessary in reason of their essence” (1p33s; see also CM, C. 306). I find it plausible that this disjunction is exhaustive. If all things are necessary because of either reason, there seems to be no room for contingency.

As we saw in Chapter 4, in the Ethics Spinoza gives two alternative definitions of contingency, endorsing one and rejecting the other. At first, our belief in contingency - our belief that things could have been otherwise than they are - is seen as stemming from our ignorance of how the absolutely infinite substance renders things necessary (1p33s1). Later on (in 4def3 and 4def4), Spinoza distinguishes between contingency and possibility. In these passages, contingency belongs to everything whose essence does not involve existence - it is, in other words, equivalent with the property I in Chapter 4 called S-contingency, whereas possibility signifies what contingency did in 1p33s1 - the property of possibly having been otherwise, which we wrongly ascribe to things when we are ignorant of why they are necessary. Thus, things that are not necessary in virtue of their essence but only in virtue of their causes can be S-contingent, even though they are necessitated by their causes. Let me revisit which protagonists of Spinoza’s metaphysics assume these different roles.

First, there is the thing necessary in virtue of its essence. The substance’s existence is necessary since it is “involved” in its essence (1d1). Since the existence of no other thing follows from its essence, everything else is S-contingent in the sense specified above. Second, there are things which are

---

necessary by reason of their causes.\textsuperscript{161} As I mentioned in Chapter 5, it is Spinoza’s view that things are necessary by reason of their cause, and God uniquely free, \textit{because} of the way God is necessary by reason of his nature. For God is necessary by reason of his nature since this nature is \textit{absolutely infinite} (1d6). As Gueroult (1968, 172-3) has pointed out, the definition of God as absolutely infinite is intended to be genetic, that is, it is supposed to define God in such a way that all his properties may be deduced from the definition.\textsuperscript{162} From God’s absolutely infinite nature, we are, supposedly, able to deduce all of his properties, which significantly includes freedom.

It is because God alone is absolutely infinite that he alone is free. By “free” Spinoza does not mean spontaneous or unconstrained but constrained by one’s nature alone (1d7). It is clear why freedom, thus conceived, follows from absolute infinity: absolute infinity implies that there \textit{is} nothing that God is not. There is therefore nothing outside of God that could constrain him from without, and so he is free, in the Spinozist sense of being exclusively internally determined.\textsuperscript{163}

Moreover, as we saw in Chapter 1, this absolutely infinite nature of God’s is identified with God’s power (1p34). On my interpretation, this means that there is no difference between what God necessarily is and what he necessarily produces. God both necessarily is, and necessarily causes himself to be, the absolutely infinite totality of all there is. This identification of power and essence is crucial to Spinoza’s system. Nothing that is real can be denied of God, for this would

\textsuperscript{161} God appears to be a curious member of this class, for he too is necessary in virtue of his cause - which he himself is (1d1). However, by “things necessary by reason of their cause” Spinoza presumably means “by reason of a cause \textit{other} than themselves”, which excludes God.

\textsuperscript{162} It may be worth recalling that Spinoza’s borrowed his understanding of a “genetic” definition from geometrical procedures. In TIE, the definition of a created thing is good when it first, gives the proximate cause of the definiendum, and second, is such that all the properties of the thing in question may be deduced from it. Spinoza gives the following example of such a definition: the circle “is the figure that is described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other is movable” (§ 98, C. 40).

\textsuperscript{163} However, as we have seen, there is a spurious category of being - beings of reasons \textit{(entia rationis)}, such as universals (2p40s1), or aids of the imagination, such as numbers (Letter 12), which, since they are not properly speaking beings, fail to belong to God’s nature.
deny him some reality - something that his absolute infinity does not allow (1p8s; Letter 35). Likewise, nothing real can remain non-caused by him.

As we have seen, Spinoza’s metaphysics admits for there being a gradation of being. Now, each thing that exists, has a nature from which some effect follows (1p36). One is to judge which thing has less reality, and which more, on the basis of how causally efficacious the thing’s nature is (see 1p9 and 1p16d). This efficaciousness ranges from God, whose nature causes everything that is, to some finite thing that has only a minuscule effect on its surroundings. However, whatever has at least one effect, has a share in reality. Having some share in reality already qualifies something as a product of God’s activity, which by definition produces all and only reality (1p34 and 1p8s together yield this result). It is therefore necessary that whatever has some reality, no matter how little, should be produced by God.

However, God cannot produce finite things directly. This is so since finite things, by definition, must “be limited by another of the same nature” (1d2). The limitation Spinoza speaks of is to be understood as causal\(^{164}\) or explanatory\(^{165}\). A thing is finite, in other words, if it is caused by, or can be explained by reference to, another thing that is like itself finite in kind, and so on \textit{ad infinitum}. Hence it is clear that the very definition of finitude implies that all finite modes must coexist in mutual determination. If they are infinite - as they must be, given God’s infinitely productive nature - their inter-determination will unfold infinitely.

The constraints the very definition of finitude places upon God’s creation of finite things explains why Spinoza supplies us with two different metaphysical descriptions of the causal determination of any singular thing. On the one hand, 1p26 states that “[a] thing which has been determined to produce an effect has necessarily been determined in this way by God”. If something produces an effect, it is real, and everything that is real belongs both to God’s nature and to his range of causal efficacy, which, as per 1p34, come down to the same thing. This is so

\(^{164}\) See Lin (2007, p. 282).

\(^{165}\) For Spinoza, as Della Rocca (1996, pp. 10-11) has argued, these coalesce.
since God’s absolute infinity implies that he is all there is - there is no reality which does not belong to God.

On the other hand, consider 1p28, where Spinoza claims that:

No singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again [...] to infinity.

On the one hand, the finite causal agent is determined by God to produce its effect (1p26); on the other hand, it is determined by its position in a causal nexus where finite things serve as links (1p28). It is only our, on Spinoza’s view flawed, theological presumptions that make us assume that these two determinations must involve totally different and unrelated determinants. Spinoza’s goal is to undermine these presumptions. For it is, on my reading, through - or more accurately, insofar as it is - every link in the infinite chain (described in 1p28) that the substance determines each finite thing causally (as Spinoza states it does in 1p26). In other words, God determines finite things by the means of an infinite mediation through their finite peers.

This should suffice to clarify what Spinoza means by claiming that everything is necessary either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause. Moreover, the concept of infinity is crucial in rendering things free in the Spinozist sense and necessary: while God is free in virtue of his absolutely infinite nature, finite things are “necessitated” by their causes in virtue of being inscribed in an infinitely unfolding causal nexus. I foresee that an objector may say that things can be determined by their causes without therefore being necessitated by them. Causal determinism holds when, if a cause is given, the effect must follow: but this does not yet show that each cause was necessary. However, the nexus itself is necessary because it is the only way God can produce an infinity of finite things, something which he, because of his absolutely infinite nature-cum-power, is necessitated to do. In Chapter 4, this peculiar necessity was treated under the rubric of Plenitude. Yet, it may be objected, although the nexus is necessarily infinite, other members could have constituted the nexus. I cannot answer this
 objection at length here, and so the following sketchy answer will have to suffice. On Spinoza’s view, God acts because he is compelled to do so by his own nature, which is infinitely active and infinitely productive of effects. In order for the production of effects to be different, God’s nature would presumably have to be different too. To assume that things could have been different contradicts substance necessitarianism if substance is all there is. Let me now relate these insights drawn from previous chapters to Spinoza’s therapeutical project.

Recall that according to Spinoza’s theory of the affects, the strength of an affect is positively proportional to the extent to which we consider the intentional object of the affect in question free. In order to be cured from our passions through cognitive therapy we should acquire adequate ideas whereby we conceive of finite things as necessary and discard inadequate ideas whereby we ascribe freedom to things other than what indeed possesses it - God.

On Spinoza’s view, we can indeed come to know God as uniquely free if we refashion our concept of freedom as belonging uniquely to that which is absolutely infinite. Moreover, we can also come to think of things we previously held contingent as necessary. This transition is possible since no finite mode is conceivable exclusively as necessary. That this is Spinoza’s position becomes particularly evident in Letter 12, where he distinguishes between two principal ways in which we can conceive of finite things. As long as we consider the essences of finite things in isolation from “the order of nature” (ordo naturae), Spinoza claims, “we can determine their existence and duration as we please, conceive it as greater or less and divide it into parts - without this doing any harm to our concept of them” (C. 202).

What does Spinoza mean by the order of nature? The phrase appears extensively in Spinoza’s oeuvre. In 2p7s Spinoza provides “the whole order of nature” with the helpful gloss “the connection of causes”. For present purposes, it suffices to note that according to 2p7, whenever a thing is conceived under the attribute of thought, its cause must also be so conceived, and so on to infinity. The whole

---

166 For a fuller discussion of the phrase, see Don Garrett (1999).
order of nature thus signifies the total succession of causes. For finite modes, the succession of causal antecedents is infinite.

In Letter 12, Spinoza thus maintains that when we consider finite things in isolation from the infinite causal order in which they are inscribed, we are free to conduct thought experiments on their “existence and duration”, neither of which we then consider as necessary. By contrast, when considered as part of the order of nature finite modes can “undergo none of these [thought operations] without our destroying at the same time the concept [conceptum] we have of them” (loc. cit. G. IV/55). When we (correctly: 1p28) consider finite things to be produced by an infinite array of causal connections among finite things, we cannot, on Spinoza's view, regard their “existence and duration” as being otherwise than they necessarily are. Only by taking into consideration the infinite causal history unfolding behind each finite mode can we adequately conceive of its existence as necessary (see 5p6d). But why is it that regarding things as locked in the embrace of an infinite causal nexus would allow us to establish their necessity? The answer to this question is as follows.\textsuperscript{167}

Each finite thing must owe its necessity to its cause. Only if the causal series can be conceptualized as an actual infinity is it possible to think of each link in the chain as necessitated. If, by contrast, the series is construed as a potential infinity, the link last conjured up will not yet be necessitated.

\textsuperscript{167} There is in addition an alternative answer to the question, which I noted in Chapter 4: if effects are not infinitely caused, their necessity could perhaps be, as it were, perceptible to the naked eye. For if there were only a finite series of causes, then the necessity of each thing in the series could be established by deducing it from the one ultimately necessary cause. A Humean would presumably balk at this proposal. But to comprehend any effect is, for Spinoza, exactly to understand why its cause necessitates it. Nonetheless, it is evident that we cannot accomplish this task in the case of any finite thing, for, in the realm of finite existents, no necessary causal connection is ever perceived or observed by us. But why can we not perceive the necessity which finite things nonetheless possess? The reason why can only be that if any finite existent is to be at all necessitated by its causes, the causes extending behind any finite thing must be infinite in such a way that we cannot successfully browse through them, which would allow us to (pace Hume) establish the necessity of the effect. (Of course, in theory, if we could accelerate after the manner of agents carrying out supertasks in philosophical thought-experiments, then we could complete an infinite enumeration of causes in however short a time. But I doubt that acceleration can be relevant to the issue at hand.)
This interpretation might rise the objection that by a concept [conceptum] Spinoza does not necessarily mean an adequate idea, or knowledge. However, in 2p44, Spinoza states that “[i]t is in the nature of Reason to regard things as necessary not as contingent”. As is well known, reason is the second kind of knowledge (2p40s2: III), and the first kind of knowledge is, on Spinoza’s view, “the only cause of falsity” (2p41). Since the sets of false and inadequate ideas are on my reading of Spinoza co-extensional, it follows that the idea we have of the existence of existing things as necessary is indeed adequate.\(^{168}\)

In Letter 12 Spinoza affirms that we are at least capable of possessing a concept of things as necessary in virtue of issuing from an infinite order of nature, namely the concept that is destroyed when we consider the same things in isolation from their causal history. Arguably,\(^ {169}\) then, we can know that a thing’s causal ancestry is infinite without knowing each individual causal relation in the chain. This latter knowledge Spinoza himself admits he does not possess - for it would amount to “knowing the whole of Nature and all of its parts” (Letter 32, C. II. 18).\(^ {170}\)

The possibility of knowing a finite mode’s causal ancestry to be infinite without knowing each of the causal antecedents is analogous to the way we, on Spinoza’s view, can know an infinite God. For Spinoza’s insistence that he can have as “clear an idea of God as [he has] of a triangle” - and thus, by 1d6, of a God consisting of infinite attributes, without therefore being able to browse through all these attributes (Letter 56, C. II. 423). Although Spinoza may not have endorsed this example, the case may be illustrated by that one does not have to browse all natural numbers in order to establish their cardinality. (Instead, only a successor rule is required.) Since knowledge of the actual infinity of a series need not

\(^{168}\) For an alternative view discussed in Chapter 4, see Newlands (2010). I agree with Newlands that necessity can only be ascribed to finite modes when the latter are considered in a maximally broad, indeed infinite, causal context, but find the claim that Spinoza is an anti-essentialist vis-à-vis the objective modality of these finite modes difficult to square with passages such as 2p44s, for reasons stated in the preceding chapter.

\(^{169}\) The exegetical reason why one would want to harmonize what Spinoza says in Letter 12 with what he subsequently states in the Ethics is that he approved of the circulation of copies of the letter even after the completion of his magnum opus (see Melamed [2014, 205], who refers to Letter 81 for a proof of this).

\(^{170}\) I thank an anonymous referee for highlighting this issue.
involve knowledge of each element *in the series*, Spinoza’s postulation of knowledge of a thing as necessarily existing in virtue of being inscribed in an infinite causal nexus need *not* violate the assumption that knowledge of actual infinity is infeasible for humans.

This assumption has recently figured in Della Rocca (1996, p. 183, n. 29), Marshall (2013) and prior to these, Diane Steinberg (1981), all of whom emphasize that the fact that the causal ancestry of each idea, *qua* a finite mode, is infinite is *prima facie* problematic for Spinoza’s theory of adequacy. Marshall (2013, pp. 22-3) summarizes the problem thus: “(a) Having an adequate idea of x requires having ideas of all x’s causal antecedents; (b) Every finite mode has an infinite chain of causal antecedents; (c) No human mind can have ideas of an infinite chain of causal antecedents. […] (d) Therefore, no human mind can have an adequate idea.”171 Both Steinberg (who submitted an account of Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge as a solution to the same problem prior to its articulation by Della Rocca) and Marshall argue that adequate knowledge is possible, since it is of eternal formal essences, elevated above the causal production of the finite things of which they are the essences (*pace* Kripke).172 Such knowledge need not involve infinite causal regresses.

By contrast, the problem of the present chapter is how Spinoza’s cognitive therapy can be successful. My answer therefore concerns the *existence* of finite modes, not their formal and eternal essences. If someone is already contemplating the eternal essences of things instead of their messy generation and destruction, she is likely to be in little need of therapy. The subject of therapy needs a way to regard the object of her passive fixation which does not *depart from* indifference for its existence. (Such indifference may be the endpoint of therapy, but it cannot plausibly be its starting point.)

---

171 Eugene Marshall does not defend (c), which he admits “might be controversial” (2013, p. 22 n. 6), but grants it for the sake for argument.
172 Koistinen (1998) similarly argues that the objects of true ideas are eternal. He however construes these objects as propositions and additional argument is required to show that for Spinoza formal essences are propositions rather than, for example, real entities.
Although we cannot have adequate knowledge of the *existence* of finite things in many respects, we *can* know that it is necessarily infinitely caused. What kind of knowledge is this?

Spinoza maintains that, in the second kind of knowledge (2p40s2[III]), we know properties common to all modes (2p38), as they follow from the nature of the attribute of which they are modes (2p13l). Accounts of the second kind of knowledge tend to focus on properties that follow uniquely from one attribute, and it is indeed by referring to properties common to all modes within an attribute (namely extension) that Spinoza intends to demonstrate 2p38. However, regardless of the attribute under which a mode is considered, “it follows from the nature of the attribute” (to borrow the phrase from 2p13l), qua infinite, that it is infinitely rich in modes.\(^{173}\) To be necessitated by the means of an infinite causal nexus is a property common to all modes, under any attribute. Spinoza’s assertion that the knowledge of things as necessary is of the second kind (2p44) presupposes that we can have adequate knowledge not only of properties common to attributes considered under an attribute, but of properties common to modes considered under *any* attribute.\(^{174}\)

While knowledge of formal *essences* is clearly indispensable to the third kind of knowledge (2p40s), knowledge of the second kind of the necessary *existence* of finite modes allows us to weaken the reign of the passions by reason. And it has transpired that in order to regard finite things as necessary, we must see them as locked in an infinite network of causes. Attributions of necessity thus depend on the vertiginous condition that humans have the capacity to posit the infinity of the causal ancestry that renders a finite thing necessary. Let me now address the question of how we, on Spinoza’s view, should conceive of the infinite causal

---

\(^{173}\) Della Rocca has suggested that there could be no sufficient reason for an infinitely creative attribute to contribute less than an infinity of finite modes (2008a, p. 71).

\(^{174}\) If common notions within an attribute are scientific in nature (belonging to physics in the case of extension, to science of mind in the case of thought), then notions common to all modes insofar as they are modes of any attribute at all, are ontological. Just as transcendental terms were applied “transcategorically” in the late Scholastic science of being, predicates such as *being infinitely caused* apply to modes across attributes. Indeed, without knowledge of trans-attribute properties, the Spinozist edifice crumbles. For propositions such as 1p28 are not attribute-specific, but rather purports to supply us with knowledge of how finite modes are caused in any attribute.
ancestry of each passion (or its intentional object) so as to be able to regard it adequately as necessary.

6.3. Perspectives on infinity. The twofold distinction.

The two key texts where Spinoza discusses the capacity whereby we acquire adequate understanding of infinities are 1p15s and Letter 12 of July 1663, otherwise known as “The Letter on the Infinite”, addressed to the friend Lodewijk Meyer. In both these texts, Spinoza distinguishes the divisible infinity that we imagine from the indivisible infinity that the intellect alone can conceive.

In 1p15s (as well as in Letter 12) Spinoza concedes that extension (in Letter 12, “extended substance”) cannot be considered as an infinitely divisible quantity without risking paradoxes à la Zenon. This, however, does not disprove that extension is indeed an attribute of God’s and as such infinite. Spinoza instead takes such difficulties to suggest that extension should not be thought of as divisible into or composed of parts. On his view, extension is an infinite and indivisible quantity. The intuitive objection to Spinoza’s claim is that while a quantity may of course be physically indivisible, any quantity seems to be conceptually divisible into lesser constituent parts. However, Spinoza denies that our human incapacity to imagine an indivisible quantity can be adduced as a ground against the existence of such a quantity. Spinoza maintains that our propensity for conceiving of quantity as divisible stems from our imagination (1p15s[V]), the source of error. In 1p15s there are thus two principal ways in which we conceive of an infinite quantity: either with the intellect as an indivisible whole or with the imagination as potentially infinitely divisible.

This distinction recurs in Letter 12. Spinoza’s point in this letter is subtly different, as he here contends that we will successfully make the overarching distinction between infinities “that cannot be divided into any parts” and infinities that “can be divided into parts without any contradiction” (Letter 12, C. 201), on the condition that we first make three preliminary distinctions.175 One of these

175 The other distinctions are causal and mathematical, respectively (Letter 12, C. 201). Concerning the former distinction, I agree with Gueroult (1966, pp. 387—90) that whereas the substance is infinite “by the force of its definition”, finite modes can be
preliminary distinctions is nonetheless again drawn between the infinity which “we can only understand but not imagine and [the infinity which] we can also imagine” (Letter 12, C. 201). Significantly, the kind of infinities which the imagination can conceive are the ones that can be mathematically manipulated - Spinoza uses the dichotomy series as an example, and, in the vein of the Aristotelian tradition, construes it as a potential infinity (Letter 12, C. 203).

In both these texts, Spinoza maintains that we can form adequate ideas of actually infinite wholes by the means of our intellect - even if we only succeed in this enterprise rarely, and with great difficulty (1p15s [V]; Letter 12, C. 202-3). But the imagination can only inadequately conceive of existing infinities. It is interesting, and certainly not arbitrary, that on Spinoza’s view necessity and contingency are also assigned separately by these capacities. For Spinoza, as previously stressed, holds that it “it depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent” (2p44c1).

It is the intellect’s capacity of adequately conceiving of an indivisible and infinite whole that makes it the case that it can spot necessity. Only by realizing the actual infinity of the causal series can we realize the necessity of an effect. The infinity must be actual as each link must be necessitated by its cause and there must be infinite links in the chain.

It is because of the imagination’s dual incapacity to conceive of a whole as infinite and indivisible that it can only see contingency. In Chapter 4 I discussed the notion of divisibility. Let us here focus on that of infinity. The imagination cannot adequately conceive of actual infinity. But by considering the causal ancestry of a finite thing as a potentially infinite succession of causes, we can never realize its necessity. For beyond the last link we have conceived as necessitated there remains another link, as yet not conceived as necessitated. Interestingly, on Spinoza’s view, the intellect’s adequate cognition of actual infinity is not mathematical. By contrast, the imagination’s inadequate perception of the whole as, temporally speaking, a potentially infinitely extending causal

called infinite “by the force of [their] cause”. I will deal in more detail with Letter 12 in the following chapter.
nexus and, spatially speaking, an aggregate of separable parts, is mathematical, on Spinoza’s view. For when the imagination thus conceives of the whole it employs time and number: both of which are but imaginary constructs (2p44s; Letter 12, C. 204).

It is the actual infinity *a parte ante* of finite causes behind our passions that we are to conceive intellectually and cease to imagine, if we are to adequately regard finite modes as necessary. In order to suit Spinoza’s therapeutical regimen, we must be able to first, in a pre-healed state, imagine this infinity, and then cease to imagine it and conceive it with the intellect alone. In order to understand which infinity can be imagined as well as understood, and whether the infinite causal nexus of finite things qualifies as this kind of infinity, let us now turn to the different infinities Spinoza subscribes to in the *Ethics*. By discussing this taxonomy of infinities, I hope I will be able to suggest one way in which we can form an adequate idea of the infinite ancestry of our passions.

6.4. *Species of infinity. The threefold distinction.*

Above I outlined for the two perspectives from which we can consider infinities, on Spinoza’s view. Independently of how we conceive them, however, Spinoza asserts that there *are* three different species of infinities instantiated in the world.

In 1p16dem Spinoza summarizes the three infinities that exist in this way: “But since the divine nature has *absolutely infinite attributes* (by D6), each of which also expresses an essence *infinite in its own kind*, from its necessity there must follow *infinitely many things* in infinite ways (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect), q.e.d” (Emphases added; Translation modified). Here I will call these infinities absolute, qualitative and quantifiable, respectively. In this chapter I will not deal with all the intriguing difficulties this division poses, but merely state how these infinities relate to the perspectival distinction mentioned above, with the purpose of further elucidating Spinoza’s therapy.

---

176 Following Leibniz (2001, p. 43), who, in a note on Spinoza’s *Ethics*, dating from around 1676, similarly distinguishes between three infinities. The infinities Leibniz distinguishes between are: “mere” infinity (*tantum infinitum*); infinity which is “greatest in its own kind” (*maximum in suo [...] genere*) and infinity which is “everything”.

183
First, there is absolute infinity. This is the kind of infinity which belongs only to that whose essence involves existence, God or Nature. Spinoza maintains that God is such that we cannot imagine him, but only understand him with the help of the intellect (Letter 12, C. 203; Letter 56, C. II. 423). The potential infinity the imagination conceives by numerical measures therefore fails to represent the infinity of Nature.

Second, there is infinity in kind, which I propose to call qualitative infinity.\(^{177}\) Whereas things finite in kind are limited by other things that are like themselves finite in kind - the example Spino adduces in 1d2 is that of a body, for another body can always be conceived as greater than any body - things that are infinite in kind are not so limited. The most paradigmatic example of something that is qualitatively infinite are God’s attributes, notoriously defined as “what the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of a substance” (1d4). Suffice it here to state that since attributes are what we conceive of as constituting the essence of a substance, and since this essence must be self-sufficient, attributes cannot be conceived in terms of something other than themselves (1p10). Since composition involves some explanatory dependence, where the compound is explained by reference to its parts, attributes cannot be conceived of as composed of parts, or as divisible. On Spinoza’s view there is therefore no danger that qualitative infinity should be divisible into parts. Qualitative infinity comes, as it were, woven in one piece. Since only the intellect can conceive of indivisible and infinite wholes, only the intellect can conceive of qualitative infinity.

Third, there is “quantifiable infinity”. By this I mean the kind of infinity that we can quantify. Outside of the abstract realm of mathematics, such quantification is illicit. For the imagination necessarily employs aids (auxilia) - number, measure and time - as it conceives of classes of modes, quantity and duration, respectively (Letter 12, C. 203, G. IV/57), tools that themselves have no reality outside of the imagination. Since modes, quantity and duration can all be quantified, the infinity of each of these may be called ‘quantifiable’. Clearly, the infinite nexus of finite modes causing each other belongs to this category, for they belong to the class of

\(^{177}\) In Letter 36 to Hudde (June, 1666), Spinoza draws on the difference between infinity in kind and absolute infinity to illuminate his cosmological proof of God’s existence.
modes. Although there is an infinity we can understand but not imagine, there is none that we cannot understand (Letter 12, C. 201), and so we can conceive quantifiable infinity with our intellect as well as imagine it.

This overview of the relation between perspectives on infinity and species of infinity can be summarized as follows: out of the three infinities that exist - whether they be instantiated in modes, attributes or substance -, only quantifiable infinity can be imagined. All infinities can be conceived by the intellect, or, which is the same, we can have adequate ideas of all these infinities. It should be emphasized that this reading is not without difficulties - but these difficulties are, as I believe, internal to Spinoza’s own texts.

One widely debated difficulty concerns the infinity of the attributes. Although each attribute is as such qualitatively infinite (expressed more clearly, this property belongs distributively to the class of attributes), collectively the attributes are infinitely many: “By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence” (1d6: Emphasis added).178

The difficulty is this: if each attribute is, as Spinoza implies in Letter 9 (C. 195-6), a nature that the intellect correctly attributes to the substance, then how can something be asserted about the attributes - namely, that they are infinitely many - which does not pertain to the substance, which is unique? This seems to sin

178 Bennett (1984, pp. 75-9) proposes that the the word ‘infinite’ could instead be construed as ‘all’, and that nothing of importance in Spinoza’s system demand that all the attributes should be more numerous than the two we know (extension and thought). This reading has been disputed by Arview (1990, however in response, not to Bennett, but to the same position as articulated by Abraham Wolf [1926, pp. 190-1] and Kline [1977, pp. 341-7]). For a response to Bennett that exposes the untenability of his position, see Melamed (see for example 2017). As Bennett himself admitted, that God should possess only two attributes is incompatible with passages such as 2p7s, Letters 63 and 65. Bennett formulates his interpretation not to explicate what Spinoza says, but to grant him only what he is obliged to to say in order for his system to hold strong, and on Bennett’s view the infinity of the attributes is so far from being a stronghold of the system that “in the Ethics it is idle” (1984, p. 79; see also 2001, pp. 115-6). Since my present purpose is to explore whether and how Spinoza can consistently grant us knowledge of the infinite ancestry of our passions, given his philosophical system as conceived in the Ethics, I grant that the set of attributes is, on Spinoza’s view, infinite.
against the transitivity of identity.\textsuperscript{179} I cannot resolve this difficulty here. Instead, I will address the limited issue of how absolute infinity in the substance can imply a quantifiable infinity of attributes. This will indicate one way in which the intellect can conceptualize quantifiable infinity without relying on the imagination.

Although it does not follow from the claim that the substance possesses \textit{all} the attributes that it possesses an \textit{actually infinite amount of} attributes, it would follow from the claim that it possesses them \textit{perfectly}, in the sense of \textit{unsurpassably}. But, the way I read Spinoza, infinity in kind is what guarantees one to be unsurpassable. One is infinite in one’s kind when one could not even in principle be surpassed in one’s kind.

This insight supplies us with the basic resources to explain how the attributes can be collectively many without therefore being quantifiable. On my reading, the substance is absolutely infinite since it possesses the qualitatively infinite attributes in an unsurpassable or qualitatively infinite way, that is, so that no possession of attributes could be greater or more perfect than that of the substance. Metaphorically put, absolute infinity can be understood as qualitative infinity raised to adverbial power.\textsuperscript{180} Arguably, if the substance just possessed all the attributes, and they amounted to any arbitrary number, it would then possess them in in the measurable and therefore surpassable way that Spinoza insists cannot pertain to the substance.\textsuperscript{181} Therefore it must possess them perfectly, and they must, as a consequence, be actually infinitely many.

I suggest that conceiving of the quantifiable infinity of attributes \textit{as a qualitative infinity of the substance} is one way in which the intellect can conceive of a

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{179} That is, presupposing the objectivist reading of the attributes, which dominates contemporary Spinoza scholarship. For a helpful overview as well as criticism of the subjectivist/objectivist division in Spinoza studies, see Shein (2009).

\textsuperscript{180} While \textit{absolute} in the phrase \textit{natura divina infinita} \textit{absolute attributa habeat} qualifies the infinity of the attributes, not that of the divine nature (stylistically, the figure is a \textit{transgressio}; I thank Josef Eskhult for discussion of the position of the adverb), I agree with Kline (1977, p. 344) that the adverb collectively characterizes the attributes \textit{when possessed by the substance}.

\textsuperscript{181} Deleuze (1990, p. 35) also invokes the reasons stated in 1p15s, stating that: “[W]e cannot pass through just three or four attributes without bringing back into the absolute the same numerical distinction which we have just excluded from infinity”.
\end{flushright}
quantifiable infinity without resorting to the tools of the imagination. For qualitative infinity we conceive with the intellect alone. If we can indeed conceive of the quantifiable infinity of the attributes as a qualitative infinity of the substance - what one would traditionally call a “divine perfection” -, it seems we could similarly conceive of the infinity of causally related finite modes. The causal ancestry of each finite mode intended by a passion is infinite, since the web in which it is inscribed is a maximal manifestation of a perfectly productive God. In spite of the etymology of the word, this “perfection” is not teleological but ontological. But how is it possible for us to “model” our understanding of the infinity of the modes on our understanding of the infinity of the attributes? What justifies this move? In Chapter 7, I will present an answer to this question.

Let me presently briefly sum up this count of infinities. There are three different ways in which things are infinite in Spinoza’s metaphysics: the modes - which are infinitely many - are quantifiably infinite, the attributes are both quantifiably and qualitatively infinite (collectively and distributively, respectively), and the substance is absolutely infinite, in the sense that it perfectly possesses the attributes. Out of these, only quantifiable infinity is imaginable. We habitually construe quantifiably infinite mathematically, as potentially infinite successions (in Letter 12, C. 203, Spinoza uses the division of time as an example). Yet potential infinity does not, on Spinoza’s view, correctly represent neither the infinity of extension nor the collective multiplicity of the attributes. Nor can we conceive of the causal ancestry of our passions as a potential infinity, if we want to regard finite things as necessary. On the contrary, to successfully combat our passions by realizing their necessity we should think of their causal ancestry in the intellect’s terms - as an actually infinite whole rather than as potential infinity.

Conclusion.

In this chapter I have given the priority of the infinite in Spinoza’s philosophy a therapeutic twist. The cognitive therapy which is to cure us from our passions can succeed in doing so if we can think adequately of the infinite causal nexus in which the finite objects of our passions are situated. Of course, we cannot have adequate knowledge of each of the individual causes behind any finite mode, for
these are not common to all. Nonetheless, Spinoza insists, we can have adequate knowledge of the infinity of the series.

But how is this possible? In this paper, I have suggested that we can conceptualize the infinite causal ancestry of our passions as a qualitative infinity. On this reading, I thus come to regard the object of my passion as part of nature more easily, to the extent that I accept the traditional definition of God as a “most perfect being” (to which Spinoza certainly subscribed, see e.g. KV II, 18; CM II, 2, Letters 2 and 60, and 1p11d). For if I consider the whole infinite nexus of causes behind my passion as one qualitative infinity in which God’s necessarily infinite power-cum-essence manifests itself, I will be less inclined to terminate the blame arbitrarily at the object of my passion, or its cause, or the cause of its cause…

By considering God, and not any seemingly contingent wretched old thing, as the ultimate cause of my sadness, I, in effect, “separate the affect” from the partially inadequate idea of infinite “external causes” (5p2d) and instead join the affect to the “true thought” of an object whose causes do not proliferate infinitely, namely the causa sui, or God. Spinoza emphasizes the emotional value of thus adequately blaming God for the passions we necessarily undergo in 5p18s: “as we understand the causes of Sadness, it ceases (by P3) to be Sadness. And so, insofar as we understand God to be the cause of Sadness, we rejoice”.

By acquiring an adequate concept of the actual infinity of the causal series unfolding behind whatever passion we suffer from we can come to regard it as necessary and God as its cause. But for this reason, adequate conceptualization of the actually infinite is also the sine qua non of love of God (amor Dei). For in order to love God, we must be able to conceive of him as a cause (Def. Aff. VI; 5p32s). But as long as we insist on thinking infinity through the imagination we are unable to see how God causes any finite mode. For then we can only pass along a seemingly contingent, potentially infinitely unfolding causal narrative, but never realize the infinite whole that he, qua all, freely causes, and by the means of which our passions are necessitated. Had we no different perspective on infinity to recourse to, we would not be able to ascend from believing in contingency to realizing the full extent God’s freedom, even as it is instantiated in our slavery. On
Spinoza view, there is a perspective that admits of this insight. But because it is so psychologically hard to acquire and sustain this perspective (1p15s [V]; Letter 12, C. 202-3), such insights are bound to be both rare and difficult, and perhaps, we might add, frustratingly transitory.

In sum, it is by changing our perspective on infinity that we can acquire the concept of necessity of the kind required to combat our passions by cognitive means. But with what right can we model our understanding of the modes’ infinity after that of the attributes? The following chapter is devoted to this question.
Chapter 7

Spinoza’s Inverse Analogy of the Infinite

Che fa l’aria infinita, e quel profondo
Infinito Seren? - Leopardi

Introduction.

In the preceding chapter, infinity was, as it were, the lens that needed to be adjusted if we were to realize the necessity of things. More precisely, I argued that by conceiving the infinity of finite modes qualitatively, we could conceive of these modes as necessary. Fatalism, for Spinoza as well as for the Stoics, can then in turn be harnessed for therapeutic purposes. We are to conceive of the infinity of the modes qualitatively by conceptually modelling their infinity after that of the attributes. But how is this conceptual move possible? First of all, what are these attributes? It is difficult to provide a quick definition of the attributes that can be agreed upon by all interpreters of Spinoza, but I think the following should be acceptable to most: the attributes are fundamental ways of being. Importantly, they are ways in which God is and is conceived to be. But with what right can we speak of the way God is?

Whether and if so in what sense we can use human language to describe God is a problem with a long history in Western thought. The intuition at the root of the problem is that God is a being so fundamentally different from us that perhaps our language lacks the resources to express what God is.
God - if he can be called a being at all - is not a being like any other, and according to influential theological traditions, this means that when attributes are predicated of God these attributes cannot retain the sense they have when they are predicated of other things. One of the reasons why theologians held this to be the case is the doctrine of divine simplicity, to be surveyed below.

In section 1, I will present two traditional ways in which simplicity was squared with the multiplicity of names said of God in religious discourse: the *via negativa* of Maimonides and the *via analogica* of Aquinas. This will allow me to, in section 2, situate my reading of the Spinozist analogy of the infinite within a relevant historical context.

7.1. Comparative background.

7.1.1. Simplicity and the problem of the divine attributes.

According to influential voices in Western theology, God - if at all a being - is not a being like any other. One of the reasons why theologians held this is the doctrine of divine simplicity. God is not only simple in the sense that he lacks parts. He is also simple in the sense that his way of being cannot be analyzed in terms of ontological categories or by the syntactical categories that (allegedly) map onto the former. More precisely, the difference between a property which inheres in a subject and the subject itself does not apply to the divine context. We often assume that beings other than God possess (or “substand”) their properties.\(^{182}\) The linguistic structure of Subject-Predicate is then thought to mimic the metaphysical structure of things. On the theological view under consideration, this schema does not apply to God. When we say, for instance, ‘God is good’, if this statement is to be true, it cannot be so because some property - goodness - inheres in a substance - God. God’s simplicity means that the syntactic difference between subject and predicate in a statement such as ‘God is good’ does not correspond to any

\(^{182}\) In his survey of medieval to early modern metaphysics, Pasnau (2011, p. 103) selects two criteria something must meet in order to qualify as a substance: “[S]ubstances *sub-stand*, which is to say that they serve as the subject of accidents, and they *subsist*, which is to say that they exist per se, on their own”.

191
metaphysical difference between substance and attribute in God. If one accepts
the doctrine of divine simplicity, there is no difference between God and his
goodness (say). As can be easily inferred, this position has controversial
consequences. The two most serious appear to be the following.

First, it seems that God must now be identical with exactly one of his properties -
and that all predicates said of God express exactly one property - for
characterizing God in terms of different properties would jeopardize his
simplicity.

Second, when truly predicated of God, attribute-names cannot pick out the same
attribute as when they are truly predicated of things other than God. If ‘simplicity’
must express the same property as all other predicates truly said of God, then it is
far from clear that we can make sense of what it means to call God simple.

Doesn't this render the doctrine of divine simplicity self-refuting? Consider
another example. When I claim that God is good I do not predicate a property of
him that is in any way different from his essence. But when I claim that Socrates
is good, I do not claim that he (Socrates) is God’s essence. Do the terms have
anything in common at all? And if not, then what are we doing when we call God
good?

It should be added that many contemporary philosophers of religion reject divine
simplicity as a result of puzzles like these. For instance, Oppy (2014, p. 22) calls
the position that God has no non-relational properties “unintelligible” and moreover unintelligible regardless of one’s metaphysics of
properties. For there is inevitably “an intrinsic, non-relational way that the monotheistic
god is” (2014, p. 23). While Oppy is right that there is at least some way in which God is,
the question is whether it is meaningful to call this way of being a property. From the
identity of essence - and essential “properties” - and existence in God, it supposedly fol-
 lows that God is fully the way in which he is.
For present purposes, I will put the first problem aside and focus on the second one. While there is much to be said about divine simplicity from a philosophical point of view, I will focus on the problems that arise from an aspect of that doctrine that I, for convenience, will refer to as Exhaustivity. Recall that if God is simple, then any attribute truly said of him will be no different from his essence, at least extensionally speaking. In other words, any attribute truly said of God will exhaust the divine essence. The condition that attributes truly said of God should exhaust the divine essence I will refer to as the Exhaustivity Condition. The Exhaustivity Condition - or something like it - shaped important segments of Western theological thought. By way of introduction, a historical vignette will be sufficient to illustrate the pedigree of the view.

The Exhaustivity Condition is outlined by Dionysius Aeropagita in his treatise *On the Divine Names*.184 Dionysius influentially states that “anyone who denies that all that is said with respect to God is expressed indivisibly, absolutely, unreservedly, and totally” of God “may be said to have blasphemed” (DN 636C - 637A).185 It might be added that Dionysius here intends only what, on his view, is said truly of God, such as the divine names in his treatise. Dionysius embraces the Exhaustivity Condition because of the demand of simplicity. The One is so intrinsically unified that any attribute that is truly predicated of it must pick out the divine essence as such. If good is an attribute that applies truly to the One,

---

184 Dionysius Aeropagita is in the scholarship often, bizarrely, referred to as pseudo-Dionysius. This is meant to signal that it the author of the Mystical Theology and the treatise *On the Divine Names* could not have been the Dionysius of Acts 17:34, with whom the author of these treatises identified. (For a refutation of this self-identification, see Lossky, 1939, p. 209, n. 8). Although the non-identity of the author Dionysius with the Dionysius of the Acts is certain, however, it does not make sense to call him pseudo-Dionysius, since he for all we know might well have been called Dionysius. If a pseudo need be included, it would be more sensible to call the author Dionysius pseudo-Aeropagita instead. However, as Marion (1977) has shown, there is also an - admittedly evasive - sense in which Dionysius can truly be regarded as a “converted aeropagite”: by which he means a thinker steeped in Greek philosophy who renounces all concepts that threaten to reify God.

185 Schäfer (2006, p. 72) draws attention to the affinity of this principle with Plotinus (Enn. II, 9, I, I). Probably, the unity of essence and existence in God, which is a more limited case of ontological simplicity in God, is sufficient to yield the Exhaustivity Condition. But this special form of simplicity is not applicable to Dionysius’ case, as he did not consider God as a being in the first place, and therefore not as a being convertible with its essence, either. For the Neoplatonists locate the One above or beyond [epikeina] being.
then its goodness cannot be one thing, and the One of which the goodness is said, another. Thus, on Dionysius’ view, in theological discourse, the attributes we ascribe to God - goodness, say - have a semantic role different from the one they have in ordinary discourse. The semantic contribution of the attribute ‘good’ as said of God is simply God. Differently put, the term ‘good’, when predicated of God, does not refer to a property of divine goodness, but to God himself. On my view, this helps explain why, for Dionysius, and in the tradition following him, attributes such as goodness or wisdom are names of God. Whereas property-names pick out properties “in” things, names pick out the individual that they refer to. The names in Dionysius’ treatise - Wisdom, Love, and Light, for example - are like ordinary proper names in that they pick out the whole being - God -, and not some property of that being. For the sake of clarity, I will nonetheless speak of divine attributes and not divine names in what follows.

Before I undertake the investigation proper, let me first note why we should acknowledge the Exhaustivity Condition as being of significance for Spinoza’s philosophy. The Exhaustivity Condition follows from the doctrine of divine simplicity. Spinoza considers simplicity a divine attribute in the CM II, 5. When it comes to his magnum opus, the Ethics, the issue of divine simplicity is more controversial. Spinoza clearly considers God’s nature mereologically simple, i.e. simple in the sense that it is neither constituted of nor divisible into parts (see 1p12; 1p13; 1p15s). But this does not entail that God’s nature is ontologically simple. The issue of divine simplicity in the Ethics has therefore been hotly debated in the scholarship.\(^\text{186}\) In this chapter, I will not take up the issue of

\(^{186}\) Some commentators, and most influentially Gueroult (1969, part I: Dieu, p. 232) and Curley (1969, p. 16) take the fact that God’s essence is nonetheless characterized as constituted by an infinity of attributes to mean that God should be called complex, yet complex in a way that does not imply divisibility. The question is of course intimately connected with how one interprets the attributes. If the attributes render truly the essence of the substance and the attributes are entirely conceptually isolated from each other, they must necessarily each present a different description of the substance. In that case, they diversify it in some manner and it is not entirely simple. If, on the other hand, as Wolfson famously maintained (1962, vol. I, pp. 151-6) the attributes are what the intellect mistakenly perceives as if constituting the essence of the substance, then the substance may be simple and the attributes do not really diversify it. Fraenkel (2006) explores the doctrine of divine simplicity in Spinoza, but he emphasizes not so much the unity of essence and
whether and in what sense Spinoza endorsed the doctrine of divine simplicity directly.

For present purposes, it is enough to note that the unity of essence and existence in God is a crucial aspect of divine simplicity. It is crucial because it was this aspect of divine simplicity which motivated theologians to consider language about God to be *sui generis*. More precisely, the Exhaustivity Condition was considered to follow specifically from the unity of existence and essence in God. Aquinas, for one, deduces the non-univocity of terms said of creatures and God, respectively, from the unity of essence and existence in God. Consider, for instance, his response to the question whether names are said of God and creatures univocally (ST, 1, 13, 5, c). When predicated of a human being, the predicate ‘wise’ signifies a property distinct from the essence of the subject. For that reason, the term “as it were circumscribes and comprehends” [*circumscribit et comprehendit*] the thing signified. By contrast, when predicated of God, ‘wise’ is extensionally no different from God’s “essence, power or being”. It is for this reason that no names can be said univocally of God and other things: in other words, all language, when predicated of God, is *sui generis*.187 (Of course, existence it implies as its historical roots in a Neo-Platonicized account of Aristotle’s conception of the active intellect.

187 For examples of similar argumentative moves, where Aquinas deduces non-univocity from the unity of essence and existence in God, see *De Potentia*, q. 7, ar. 6, co. “Deus autem alio modo se habet ad esse quam aliqua alia creatura: nam ipsa est suum esse, quod nulli ali creaturae competit. Unde nullo modo univoce de Deo creatura dicitur” (1980c, p. 244). See also *In I Sent.*, ds. 35, q. 1, art. 4, c (1980a, p. 92): “Et ideo cum omnium quae dicuntur de Deo natura vel forma sit ipsum esse, quia suum esse est sua natura, propter quod dicitur a quibusdam philosophis, quod est ens non in essentia, et sciens non per scientiam, et sic de alius, ut intelligatur essentia non esse aliiui ab esse, et sic de alius: *ideo nihil de Deo et creaturis univoce dici potest*” (Emphasis added) and *De Veritate*, q. 2, art. 11, c. In the latter passage, Aquinas states that it is impossible to predicate anything univocally of creatures and God, since univocation presupposes a commonality, but that commonality is precluded because of God’s unique relation to his being, i.e. by the fact that God is his own being (*est suum proprium esse*) (1980c, p. 16).

Of course, that names cannot be said of God and creatures in the same sense as a result of his simplicity did not originate with Aquinas. For a predecessor, see Albinus’ *Didaskalikos* (as cited in Lyttkens, 1952, pp. 102-3).

It may be useful to bear in mind, as Montagnes emphasizes, that divine simplicity would not in and of itself have resulted in non-univocity, if being (esse) had not first been non-univocal: “Puisque l’esse est ce par quoi les êtres de même nature diffèrent les uns des autres, il s’ensuit que l’esse n’est jamais univoquement commun et que l’être (ens) n’est pas un prédicat univoque. Or en Dieu la nature est identique à l’esse; il ne peut donc
Aquinas does not take this to exclude an analogical commonality of names, as will be discussed below.)

Spinoza too held that essence and existence are one in God (1p20). Yet, it is evident from Spinoza’s philosophico-theological practice that the unity of essence and existence in God does not have the same consequences, on his view, for the semantics of theological language as it has for his predecessors. In section 2, I will argue that for Spinoza the analogy proceeds in a direction opposite to how Scholastic authors conceived it. But in order to see the historical importance of this claim, it is necessary to first introduce alternative solutions to the problem of the *sui generis* nature of religious language.

7.1.2. Two solutions to the problems engendered by the Exhaustivity Condition.

Among all the traditional divine attributes, simplicity is arguably the hardest to understand. In this section, I will focus on some especially noteworthy consequences of that doctrine for the semantics of theological discourse in two traditions preceding and influencing Spinoza.

In providing this context, my goal is not to collate all passages Spinoza could in principle have drawn from - such a reconstruction of the intersection of Spinoza’s reasoning, on the one hand, and the philosophical and theological lore preceding him, on the other, has already been carried out by Wolfson (1962, pp. 6-10), and, in the specific context of scholasticism, by Freudenthal (1887, pp. 85-138). Nor is my intention to establish which sources he actually did draw from (the task of Quellenforschung). The present study is more concerned with the systematic relationships between ideas than with their historical lines of transmittance. Accordingly, my purpose in writing this background is to set the stage for the

rien avoir d’univoquement commun avec le créé. L’argument se présente comme une conséquence noétique de la distinction métaphysique [i.e. the distinction between esse and quiddity] empruntée à Avicenna” (2008, p. 68). An investigation potentially of great interest would undertake to establish a line of influence running from Arab philosophy to Spinoza. I am not competent to say anything about this connection.
subsequent investigation into Spinoza’s position on the meaning of the term ‘infinite’. Since the intellectual stage across which the debate over the divine attributes unfolded is vast - spanning several centuries and three world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) - I do not claim that the following exposition will be truly representative, much less exhaustive. Instead, I have selected a limited sample of texts that especially clearly and influentially raise issues whose depth and significance reverberate in Spinoza’s thinking on divine infinity. These texts are The Guide for the Perplexed by Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas’ ST I, q. 13 on the names of God, and In I Sent., ds. 2. q. 1, art. 3, as well as other, related, texts in the Thomist corpus.

7.1.2.1. Introduction to the problem of the divine attributes.

By divine attributes (or, as these are called in the Dionysian tradition, “names”) are meant predicates that are truly said of God. Examples of non-symbolical attributes in the monotheistic, Abrahamitic religions are wise, merciful or good. The problem concerning the divine attribute consisted in how attributes belonging to human language can be true of a being so utterly different from everything else we characterize in our language.

Of course, it is possible to take propositions about God at face value. On such an approach, an attribute may be applied to God in the same sense as it is applied to human beings or things in the world. In subscribing to such a view, one assumes that the proposition that an utterance about God expresses is exactly the proposition that it seems to express. For instance, when God is gendered in the Bible, he is often described as male. When one assumes that this description of God implies that God is male, in more or less the same sense as creatures are male, one presupposes that the word ‘male’ is used univocally in these contexts. Although univocity is assumed in many contemporary critiques of religion, this kind of literal exegesis seems to have been very uncommon in the traditional debate on divine attributes.

To combat such literal (mis-)understandings of the Torah, Maimonides composed his Guide for the Perplexed around the year 1190, a treatise originally composed
in Judeo-Arabic and then translated to Hebrew. Its Latin translation *Dux Neutrorum* exerted significant influence in the scholastic tradition of the West. Spinoza was demonstrably well acquainted with this work (which he criticizes explicitly in the TTP).  

In his *Guide*, Maimonides frequently cites the Talmud saying that the “Torah speaks in the language of men” (see for instance Part I, Ch. XXVI, p. 34-5). The language of the Bible, especially when it speaks of God, is not to be taken at face value. Instead, Maimonides maintains, all attributes that are predicated of God (including not only attributes such as male [for this specific example, see Part I, Ch. XIX, pp. 28-29], which imply corporeality and therefore, on Maimonides’ view, are evidently metaphorical, but also abstract attributes such as good, wise or merciful) are *polysemous homonyms*: whenever these words are used as divine attributes, their sound (and, one may add, their written representation) is in all respects identical with the homonymous words applied to worldly things, but their significance is entirely altered. By asserting that what appear to be two tokens of the same word are merely homonyms, Maimonides aims to rule out the possibility of a qualified guess concerning the meaning of a divine attribute on the basis of what the same word means in other contexts. Given that mere homonyms have only their sound in common, there is no intensional common denominator.
between the meaning of goodness, as applied to God, and the meaning of
goodness when predicated of, for instance, a human being. If theological language
is to be true, then even predicates such as existence or (being in possession of an)
intellect are to be used equivocally of God and other things (Ch. XXXV, p. 49;
Ch. XLVII, p. 64), or in Maimonides’ words, the attributes of existence and
intellect have “no relation” to the way these words are applied to other things.¹⁹⁰
There is no principled way of extending one’s knowledge of God by the means of
exploring the meaning of the homonymous words as these are applied to things
other than God. We can’t really say anything about God. Or, to more exactly
render Maimonides’ view, to affirm attributes of God does not make us advance
in theological knowledge. The only way in which one can advance in the science
of the divine, Maimonides maintains, is by negative theology, for by successively
negating purported attributes of God one gradually becomes aware of one’s
unknowing. However, Maimonides emphasizes, such negations must proceed by
proof; that is, one must rationally convince oneself that a given attribute is to be
negated of God in order to truly advance in theology. The “proof” in question
must be based on the theological insight that one’s mundane categories fail to
apply to God. To proceed by rational means to realize the full extent of one’s
ignorance of God is the best knowledge of God there is (for Maimonides’ view
concerning the admissibility of negative attributes as opposed to positive ones, see
Part I, Ch. LVIII-LX).

However, Maimonides also sanctions another theological practice, which ascribes
attributes to God by regarding God through the lens of his acts. Considering God
through the intermediary of his acts does not yield knowledge of his essence,
however, and is therefore labeled as “the seeing of the back” (Maimonides is
drawing on Moses’ encounter with God in Exod. 33, 23) in contradistinction to
“the perception of the Divine face” (Part I, Ch. XXI, p. 34). Insofar as God is the

¹⁹⁰ For Maimonides’ view on relation, see Part I, Ch. LII. In this chapter, Maimonides
maintains that “whenever we speak of a relation between two things, these belong to the
same kind; but when two things belong to different kinds though of the same class there
is no relation between them” (p. 71). The example Maimonides adduces - that we cannot
compare the intensity of a red color with that of a green - fails to prove his point, as it is
entirely possible to compare the intensities between different colors (how otherwise
would Da Vinci’s “rational” colouring system be possible?).
cause of goodness (and other perfections) we call God good. However, it is clear that Maimonides does not consider the method of ascribing attributes to God on the basis of his causality as being as helpful a theological tool as the *via negativa*.

In the Latin West, by contrast, Thomas Aquinas elaborated the analogical “method” - a way of conceiving how non-symbolical attributes (e.g., goodness or the good itself [bonitas ipsa]) can be truly predicated of God. This “method” can be seen as an attempt to forge a middle path between univocity (the position that names are predicated of God in the same sense as they are predicated of other things) and equivocity (the position that they are fundamentally unrelated) (see ST I, 13, 5). Although the significations of terms such as ‘goodness’ are diverse when applied to God and his creatures, the significations of these terms are nonetheless related, and it is the relation of creation that makes intensional commonality possible.

7.1.2.2. Multiplicity of attributes, simplicity of God.

One may distinguish between divine names, or attributes, said of God in scriptural traditions, such as - taking Dionysian theonyms as example, Light, Beauty, Love - and the philosophical justification theologians provided for this traditional characterization of God. One difficulty consisted in reconciling the apparent multiplicity of God’s attributes in tradition, and the demand that God be supremely one and simple, a demand common to the monotheist belief systems of Judaism, Islam, and, with some modification, Christianity. If, however, predication works in the divine context in the way that I have described, then to demand that the divine nature be simple doesn’t amount to demanding much.

---

191 For three comprehensive studies of analogy in Aquinas, see Klubertanz (1960); Montagnes (2008) and Lyttkens (1952). Since Lyttken’s study focuses mainly on Greek philosophical and then pre-Thomist Christian sources, Wolfson’s “The Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy and Maimonides”, (1938, pp. 151-73), complements its historical background.

It may be worth to emphasize, in this context, that one contemporary scholarly view with regards to Aquinas’ doctrine of analogy is that Aquinas had no “theory” of analogical predication at all. On this view, rather than being a doctrine asserted about being (an *analogia entis*), analogical predication is a form of theological practice. This reading has been advanced by Etienne Gilson (1956). Such a theological reading stands in contradistinction to the heavily metaphysical reading of Aquinas by Karl Barth.
Because whatever ‘simple’ means when predicated of God it either has no link to the meaning of the word we use in daily discourse, or else it has only an analogical link. This one might want to take as a reason for rejecting any meaningful form of divine simplicity. However, the doctrine of simplicity need not be refuted on the grounds that ‘simple’, if truly said of God, cannot mean what our dictionary says it does. Divine simplicity will be true, not if ‘simple’ means what it does when we call things other than God simple, but rather if it means something - perhaps something unknown -, and there are no attributes that when truly said of God fail to mean the same thing.

This appears to be the way in which Maimonides attempted to resolve the tension. He concedes that if God possessed diverse attributes - attributes such as unity, omnipotence or wisdom - he, having many attributes, would be characterized by a kind of plurality that is incompatible with the demand that God be simple.

Since my purpose is to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, I only mention one passage from Maimonides in support of this view. In Part I, Ch. LXIII of his Guide, Maimonides summarizes his philosophical interpretation of the Biblical passage in which God says “I am what I am” (Exod. 3:14) as follows: “The principal point in this phrase is that the same word which denotes ‘existence’ is repeated as an attribute” (p. 94). In other words, whenever an attribute is predicated of God, “the object [i.e. God] and the attribute by which it is described are necessarily identical” (p. 95).192

Since simplicity is therefore not negotiable God cannot, for Maimonides, be said to have any of these attributes. Yet Maimonides also maintains that God is indeed simple, omnipotent and wise. These appear to be positive attributes. How does he, then, square these seemingly contradictory claims?

192 For an alternative to this ontological reading of Exodus, see Manaranche (1980, pp. 12-17); Mascall (1949). According to Manaranche, the episode with the burning bush does not make a highly sophisticated philosophical statement, but instead expresses a refusal to answer. Manaranche provides some other biblical samples of similar locutions to the same effect. Marion (1977, p. 186) comments on the duality of the traditions in the following words: “Rien de plus faux que d’opposer les deux traductions et traditions. Leur contradiction n’apparaît qu’à celui qui les dissocie hors distance.”
Recall that, when simplicity is endorsed, the fact that God is P, does not imply that God possesses the property expressed by P (cf. Part I, Ch. LVII), as one would perhaps expect to be the case were the subject something other than God. While other things have attributes that are accidental and therefore distinct from their essence, such as existence or tattooed-ness, God’s essence is identical with each and every one of his attributes.\(^\text{193}\) The statement ‘God is simple’ therefore accomplishes just as much (or just as little) as the statement that ‘God is one’. Indeed, ‘God is one’ accomplishes just as much (or just as little) as the statement that ‘God is God’. One may wonder what the Maimonidean view implies for the meaning of statements about God. It is tempting to say that, given that there is no difference between subject and predicate in God, when ‘is’ appears to accomplish a predication (of, say, goodness to God) what it actually accomplishes is simply an identity statement (God is God). But perhaps it would be more faithful to think of the ‘is’ in true statements about God as expressing neither predication nor identity but rather something that is proper to the divine sphere.

In any case, it is clear that, for Maimonides, each and every attribute that can be truly predicated of God merely restates his unknowable essence. Since the meaning of all divine attributes converge, be their point of convergence beyond the horizon of human knowledge, it is, on Maimonides’ view, false to think that God is characterized by an inner plurality. To be accurate, it is false to think that God is characterized by an inner plurality, if we take the predicate of ‘being characterized by an inner plurality’ to mean something different from ‘being simple’.

The apparent multiplicity of divine attributes is an illusion, generated by the multiple meanings of the mundane words homonymous with the divine attributes. The diverse significations of words such as ‘goodness’ and ‘wisdom’ do not testify to any difference between the divine attributes of goodness and wisdom, as

\(^\text{193}\) An exception to this rule is the tetragrammaton (the Jewish letters Yod He Waw He), which is not an attribute but the “proper name” of God. See Part I, ch. LXI, pp. 98-91. I will not discuss this exception.
the relation between these two classes of words (attributes non-divine and divine, respectively) is one of *equivocity*.

Aquinas takes issue with the Maimonidean position on the relation between attributes said of God and creatures on three grounds (ST I, q. 13, art. 2, co [1980b, p. 202]). First, the Maimonidean way of construing attributes as true of God merely by because God is their cause does not allow us to say why certain attributes are said of God and others not. Why do we call God good because he is the cause of goodness but not a body because he is the cause of bodies? Second, if we call God good merely because he causes goodness, then God’s goodness will be secondary to that which he causes. (Below, I will return to in what sense attributes are on Aquinas’ view secondarily predicated of God). Third, and interestingly, Aquinas appeals to speaker intention: it is contrary to the intention of the speakers (*contra intentionem loquentium de deo*) to assume that in calling God good they are engaging in negative theology or positing God as the cause of goodness.\(^{194}\)

By subscribing to analogical predication Aquinas instead hoped to establish a relation between divine and non-divine attributes.

While in Maimonides the signification of non-divine attributes is irrelevant for the (inscrutable) meaning of their divine counterparts, for Aquinas the meaning of words attributed analogically to God stands in *some* relation to the meaning of the same word even as it is used in mundane parlance. In other words, we do not arbitrarily apply the term ‘goodness’ to both humans and God. There is some similarity between what is picked out by the predicate when it is applied to God and when it is applied to humans (for instance). When I say (truly) that Caesar is good and when I say (truly) that God is good, this predicate picks out a property of Caesar’s, whereas it picks out something different in the case of God - presumably, his essence. But nonetheless the property in Caesar and whatever feature about God that makes it the case that the predicate can be truly attributed

\(^{194}\) For a comment on this, as well as collation with other passages in the Thomist corpus, see Ashworth (1991, p. 59).
of him do have something in common. Since there is something in common between God and Caesar’s goodness, the two types of the predicate ‘good’, as applied of God and humans, are related by their meaning, even if their meaning isn’t the same. We may think of this as similarity in meaning which is nonetheless not an identity of meaning: a kind of intensional commonality. Aquinas, of course, calls it analogy. The reason why analogy holds is divine preeminence: creatures can enjoy whatever perfections they have, because these perfections “preexist” in God (see for instance ST I, q. 13, art. 2. co; see also how Aquinas himself qualifies the position of Dionysius as one based on the logic of preeminence in In I Sent, ds. 2. q. 1. art. 3, co.).

But if there is some link between what the words ‘goodness’ and ‘wisdom’ signify when attributed of, say, a human being and God, respectively, does this not mean that the attributes, insofar as they are truly predicated of God, must also retain some of the difference they have when predicated of humans? Must not Aquinas introduce something like difference in God to distinguish between whatever it is about him that ‘goodness’ and ‘wisdom’ pick out, respectively? For if goodness in God is linked to goodness in humans, and wisdom in God is linked to wisdom in humans, then it appears that the same kind of difference that obtains between these two properties in humans must apply to God as well. How, otherwise, are we to account for the fact that ‘goodness’ said of God (whatever that is) preserves an intensional link with ‘goodness’ said of humans but not with ‘wisdom’ said of humans?

For Aquinas, ‘goodness’ and ‘wisdom’ are clearly terms with different meanings. Yet, when said of God, they pick out the same thing. It may be objected that, being predicates, ‘goodness’ and ‘wisdom’ don’t pick out any thing at all. While the role of proper names is to pick out things, the semantic contribution of predicates is different. Informally, a proposition which assigns a predicate to an individual is true just in case the individual belongs to the set of things possessing the property expressed by the predicate. But, as already suggested, the truth of

\textit{195} “\textit{cum igitur dicitur deus est bonus, non est sensus, deus est causa bonitatis vel deus non est malus, sed est sensus, id quod bonitatem dicimus in creaturis, praeexistit in deo, et hoc quidem secundum modum altiorem}” (1980b, p. 202).
‘God is good’ and similar statements cannot be conditional upon God’s possessing the property in question. It is important to realize that *simplicity bars that possibility*. Whatever the statement ‘God is good’ accomplishes, assuming it to be true, it cannot be to assert that goodness is one property that inheres in God. But then exactly what does the statement accomplish? Perhaps we are acquainted with God’s goodness *as if* it were a property inhering in God. So, by attributing goodness to God we can come to know God under a new guise, in spite of the fact that our perception of a diversity - the one between subject and predicate - does not track any real diversity. What I am suggesting is that in spite of the fact that God is no different from his goodness, we can know him under different guises: for instance, we can come to know him *as* good or wise.

Such intensional differences between co-extensional or co-referential terms is not itself problematic. One might want to suggest that, just as Hesperus and Phosphorus signify the same planet under different guises, so the statements ‘God is good’ and ‘God is God’ differ only in their cognitive significance. However, while ordinarily two terms can plainly be co-referential or co-extensional and yet differ in cognitive significance without difficulty, the doctrine of divine simplicity makes it problematic whether this can be the case with God. Being the brightest evening-star and the being the brightest morning-star are two descriptions that happen to pick out to the same object. Venus can be known under these two different guises since the planet can be truly characterized in two different ways. There are two separate facts about Venus that explain why each description is true. But the doctrine of divine simplicity says that there can’t be some fact about God F1 that explains why some predicate P1 is true of him that is in any way different from another fact F2 that explains why another predicate P2 is true of him. Of course, if the situation is such that any true statement about God, such as, presumably ‘God is good’ is, in spite of its grammatical form, an identity statement, we are not dealing with any predicates at all. But the point can easily be modified to accommodate for that. In that case, it seems that if X and Y are two different names for God, and X and Y are co-referential terms that intend God under different guises, then there must be one fact about God which explains why can be known under the guise of X and another fact which explains why he can be known under the guise of Y. In other words, even if simplicity entails that real
predication is impossible, there must, it seems, still be at least two different facts about God that explain why he can be truly referred to under different guises, in the same way as the fact that grounds the co-reference of ‘Venus’ and ‘the evening-star’ is the fact that Venus is the brightest celestial body visible on the sky in the evening, while the fact that grounds the co-reference of ‘Venus’ and ‘the morning-star’ is the fact that Venus is also the brightest celestial body in the morning. However, we construe the semantics of statements about God, simplicity entails that F1 and F2 must ultimately be the same fact: God himself.

The question of whether the multiplicity of meanings testifies to a multiplicity in God’s nature and thereby thwarts simplicity is directly addressed by Aquinas in In I Sent., ds. 2. q. 1, art. 3 as well as in ST, q. 13, art. 4. The title of I Sent., ds. 2. q. 1, art. 3 is “Whether the diversity of rationes, by which attributes differ, is only in the intellect or also in God” (Utrum pluralitas rationum, quibus attributa differunt, sit tantum in intellectu, vel etiam in Deo)\(^ {196} \) and the title of ST, q. 13, art. 4 is “Whether the names of God are synonymous”. The word ratio figures in one of the titles. What is a ratio? In I Sent., ds. 2. q. 1, art. 3, co (1980a, p. 8) Aquinas rejects that this concept is to be understood as the mind’s conception (conceptio) of the meaning (intentio); it is rather the meaning (intentio) itself, in abstraction from any perceiving mind (“nec tamen hoc nomen [sc. ratio] significat ipsam conceptionem [...] sed significat intentionem hujus conceptionis”). The ratio can therefore be understood as the meaning of a term. If the intensional diversity between the divine attributes can be resolved by appealing to the human intellect, then the divergence between these attributes has nothing to do with God but is entirely due to facts about human psychology and language, which would be a retreat to the Maimonidean position. Contrariwise, if the meanings of the attributes differ not only in the intellect’s perception [in intellectu], but also in the divine reality [in re], then, it seems, the divine reality must be internally

\(^ {196} \) For a detailed study of the history of the composition of this I Sent., ds. 2. q. 1, art. 3, as well as the testimony this history bears to Aquinas’ evolving relation to Maimonides’ work, see Rubio (2006). For the purposes of this chapter I have availed myself of the English translation included as an appendix in Rubio’s study.
characterized by multiplicity. The manifoldness of scriptural attributes would thus contradict the theological demand of divine simplicity.\textsuperscript{197}

In the arguments contrary to the position he holds, Aquinas offers various reasons - rational as well as traditional - in favor of the origin of the diverse meanings in the intellect. The arguably most central defence of the merely [tantum] intellectual locus of these meanings is the fact that God is “one and simple” [unus et simplex] (In I Sent., ds. 2, q. 1, art. 3, ag. 4 [1980, p. 7]), and that his essence, qua “supremely one” [summe una] “cannot be the root of a multiplicity existing within itself” [non potest esse radix alicujus multitudinis in ea existentis] (In I Sent., d. 2, q. 1, art. 3, ag. 5 [loc. cit.]). This is the familiar Maimonidean position that Aquinas will attempt to abandon.

In the third argument to the contrary (In I Sent., ds. 2, q. 1, art. 3, ad. 3 [1980a, p. 8]), Aquinas claims that the multiplicity of attributes is not posited in God as if he were a complex thing, but rather “according to his simple perfection” (\textit{secundum suam simplicem perfectionem}).\textsuperscript{198} The traditional attributes - wisdom, goodness, and so on - are indeed perfections, but God possesses them so to speak in a simple way. But the way that God can comprehend a multiplicity of perfections in such a way that they are one is hidden from us. Whereas the intension of each attribute is grounded in God’s nature, the fact that a human (or indeed angelic) intellect conceives of these meanings as not involving each other is due to the fact that our intellect cannot in one conception [\textit{una conceptione}] take in different modes of perfection (In I Sent. ds. 2. q. 1. art. 3. co. [1980, p. 8]).\textsuperscript{199} This means, as far as I can see, that the attributes are not flawed in what they signify (e.g., the goodness of God), but inaccurate in that they, for a limited intellect, fail to signify the other

\textsuperscript{197} For Aquinas’ view on divine simplicity, see ST I, q. 3. Just like Maimonides, he held perfect simplicity to entail the unity of essence and existence in God; ST I, q. 3, art. 3 (1980b, p. 188).

\textsuperscript{198} Aquinas discusses the authority of the Dionysian text in the two first answers to the contrary. However, the notion of perfection may be of Dionysian inspiration as well. For among the many theonyms Dionysius deals with, perfection is particularly important. For instance, Dionysius labels God the “principle of perfection for those who are being perfected” (\textsuperscript{τὸν τελευμένων τελετορχία: 589C [1990, p. 112]})

\textsuperscript{199} Aquinas approvingly cites Chrysostomos view that even the angels fail to see God in a “comprehensive vision”, since even they fail to address him with one name (In I Sent. ds. 2. q. 1. art. 3. co. [1980, p. 8]).
attributes that equally pertain to God (e.g., his wisdom). Divine attributes such as goodness succeed in being true about God, but their way of doing so is flawed (or as Aquinas puts it, imperfect: see ST I, q. 13, art. 2, co), for in spite of being identical in God, we fail to see that they are identical with each other. In In I Sent. ds. 2, q. 1. art. 3. co, Aquinas contrasts this partial understanding of God with the unified comprehension of which the prophet Zechariah speaks of in these words: “In that Day the Lord shall be one and His name one”. Were we to enjoy the vision the prophet speaks of, Aquinas implies, we would be able to see how intentionally diverse attributes can be grounded in a simple nature. But as things stand, we are blind to the compatibility of simplicity and intensional diversity.\footnote{Aquinas also appears to say that this unified vision will belong to the blessed in the “homeland” (patria) (In I Sent. ds. 2, q. 1. art 3. co). Whether or not Aquinas actually thought that the beatific vision would involve such a comprehensive view of God is a question with which I am not concerned.}

Aquinas thus by fiat attempts to reconcile two seemingly incompatible requirements. That is, he acknowledges that both of the following conditions must be met. On the one hand, any truly predicated attributes, for instance wisdom and goodness, must be really one, or “absolutely and really one in God” (\textit{omnino unum re in Deo}: In I Sent., ds. 2, q. 1, art. 3, co [1980a, p. 8]), lest the simplicity of the divine nature be compromised. On the other hand, their meanings must differ, and this difference must stem not only from the intellect, but also from “the quality of the thing itself” [ex proprietate ipsius rei], that is, the diversity of attributes must be genuinely grounded in God’s simple nature. How does this grounding take place? In order to answer this question Aquinas appeals to the attribute of \textit{simple perfection} which is the feature about God which is supposed to explain how intensionally diverse attributes can be true of God in such a way that his simplicity isn’t compromised. \textit{Simple perfection} is a meta-attribute, namely the attribute of being able to possess attributes in such a way that one’s simplicity isn’t compromised.\footnote{Aquinas’ position is meant to defend simultaneously the simplicity of God, and the possibility of adequately applying attributes to God whose meanings differ. However, for the sake of completeness, it may be noted that Aquinas’ solution to the dilemma is not absolute. This is so since the condition of divine simplicity is not itself absolute. Aquinas, subscribing to the Christian doctrine of trinitarianism, asserts that “in God everything is one in reality [re], except for the nonbegotteness, the begottenness and the procession”}

Whether it has explanatory value is doubtful.
7.1.3. Two comparative remarks.

Before investigating how Spinoza considers predication to work across divine and non-divine contexts, let me first contrast his view on the attributes with the traditional debate. Let me first briefly address the question whether such a comparison can be justified. While in an early text, Spinoza considers any property truly said of God an attribute (CM II), in the Ethics, Spinoza’s use of the word is more technical. In his magnum opus, he notoriously defines an attribute as “what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (1d4) and treats extension and thought as the only two attributes to which human beings have access. Of course, extension and thought are not attributes on a par with wisdom and goodness. Yet, the cited definition of ‘attribute’, along with his adherence to the unity of essence and existence in God (1p20), clearly makes a comparison interesting. For, together they imply that an attribute must (at the very least from the intellect’s point of view) meet the Exhaustivity Condition: each attribute must be (thought of as) identical with God’s essence and hence (as per 1p20) with his existence. Although I cannot here explore the relation between Spinozist attributes and traditional ones in further detail, allow me to make two comparative observations.

First, while for Aquinas we cannot in this life perceive the many different divine perfections in one conception, for Spinoza such a unified perception would not be

---

(In I Sent., ds. 2, q. 1, art. 3, ad. 6, [1980, p. 9]). These abstracta signify the three divine persons. Aquinas’ solution of the difficulty of the other divine attributes does not apply to these persons, who differ not only because the ratio we conceive of each fails to encompass the other two, but also because they are really [re] different. This position naturally leads to the question: what about God’s nature justifies the real co-existence of these three divine persons as different “hypostases”? What makes the three persons different from all other attributes? There is no philosophically justifiable answer to this question: the trinity is a datum of faith, such that not only its truth, but also its logical possibility, can never be validated by reason alone.

202 This does not mean that Spinoza was the first to consider extension (or space) and thought divine attributes. Thinking had long been considered a divine attribute in the Western tradition. And, more remarkably, extension, space, or place was considered a divine attribute in Jewish thought and by thinkers under the influence of Jewish philosophy. For a historical introduction to the view of space as a divine attribute, see Jammer (1954, pp. 26-34). For a more detailed comparison, see Fraenkel (2009, pp. 77-111).
possible even in an afterlife. For on Spinoza’s view, the attributes are conceptually and causally self-contained (see 1p10 and 1a4). By postulating that the attributes are causally and conceptually self-contained, Spinoza presents a Gordian resolution to the problem of the intensional diversity of the attributes. The attributes are intensionally diverse because they are fundamentally unique ways of being and of being conceived. But why are they fundamentally unique? The attributes’ property of being such that they, or any one of their modes, cannot even in principle be explained by reference to another attribute or any one of its modes, is their *infinity*, and more precisely, their *infinity in kind*, the kind of infinity I above called *qualitative infinity*. By claiming that the attributes are infinite in kind Spinoza thus extricates himself from the problem of how many intensionally different attributes can be said of a God in whom essence and existence are one.

Second, we find a rarely noted parallel between Aquinas’ concept of simple perfection and Spinoza’s concept of absolute infinity. Simple perfection is what makes it necessary for a simple God to be truly characterized by several intensionally diverse, yet co-extensional, attributes. Likewise, absolute infinity is what makes it necessary for God to be truly characterized by several intensionally diverse, yet co-extensional, attributes (in 1d6). The attributes are co-extensional since whether one conceives a thing under extension or thought (or any other attribute), it remains “one and the same thing” [*una eademque res*] (2p7s). Of course, the substance’s absolute infinity is itself rooted in Spinoza’s ontological principle that maximal being (reality or perfection) requires a maximal amount of eternal and infinite attributes (1p10s).

These two observations indicate that it is worthwhile to further explore the inquiry of the meaning of Spinoza’s theological statements in the specific context of divine infinity.

7.2. *Infinity in Spinoza’s system.*

Let me now treat the question of how infinity in Spinoza’s philosophy can be predicated of God as well as of modes. In light of the summary above, it seems
most illuminating, from a historical point of view, to ask this question in the following way: (i) Is the word ‘infinite’, in Spinoza’s system, used of God and other beings univocally, equivocally or analogically? My response to this question is structured as follows. In order to bring Spinoza’s position into relief, I first (2.1) briefly present Aquinas’ view regarding the primacy of names predicated of God. (2.2) I defend the thesis that the word ‘infinite’ functions analogically in Spinoza’s philosophy. More precisely, I show that whereas ‘infinite’ is predicated of modes and substances according to an analogy of attribution (2.2.1), it is predicated of substance and attributes, on the one hand, and attributes and modes, on the other, according to an analogy of proportionality (2.2.2). My ultimate goal is however not to classify Spinoza’s uses of analogy according to scholastic taxonomies, but rather to identify the (arguably original) way in which an analogy of the infinite operates in Spinoza’s system, in order to localize the place of this analogy in his ethical and soteriological project. In doing so, I will be able to nuance an influential reading of Spinoza as presenting an entirely univocal model for predication across divine and non-divine contexts. For instance, Jean-Luc Marion writes about a “tendency toward univocity” which characterizes Spinoza, Malebranche and Leibniz. More radically still, Marion also hypothesizes that after Descartes, all analogies disappear. By contrast, I will show that Spinoza’s tendency towards univocity does not envelop the infinite, and that there is, as a consequence, at least one post-Cartesian analogy.

In answering question (i), I aim to highlight a controversial and arguably original feature of Spinoza’s analogy: it proceeds from God’s nature, which is the first analogate, metaphysically as well as epistemically speaking, and is only derivatively true of other beings. In other words, for Spinoza we know God before we know ourselves. But this epistemic primacy of divine infinity may be questioned on experiential grounds. Surely, we don’t know this infinite being - or at least we don’t know it as well - as Spinoza says we do…? This leads to the final

203 Marion (1981, p. 18): “la tendance à l’univocité qui caractérise, en ses sens différents, Spinoza, Malebranche et Leibniz, et qui leur oppose à la tension cartésienne vers l’équivocité, s’inscrit dans une problématique propre à la théologie révélée.”

204 “On pourrait même risquer qu’à partir de Descartes, [le] déploiement [de la métaphysique moderne] tire d’abord les conséquences de la disparition de toute analogie, même en esquisse”: Ibid., p. 453, see also conclusions VI and VII, pp. 453-4.
question to be dealt with in this chapter, namely: (ii) How can Spinoza maintain an epistemic priority of divine infinity in spite of the fact that appearances suggest otherwise? In other words, is it defensible to claim that God’s essence is first known, when few would admit of having such knowledge? In response, (2.3) I suggest that in order to make sense of the epistemic priority which God enjoys we must distinguish between two different senses (veiled and unveiled) in which God is known to us. To pass from merely veiled to unveiled knowledge of God is an epistemic as well as an ethical ascension. Lastly, I conclude the chapter by commenting on how my reading deals with the puzzle mentioned at the end of Chapter 6.

7.2.1. Different ways in which analogates may be primary.

Roughly, an analogy is a relation between a term and what it signifies or between one term and its signified, on the one hand, and another term and its signified, on the other hand. The terms are called analogates and the property they signify is called the analogon.205

The analogy I will discuss is the analogy which corresponds to a category of predication identified and developed most importantly by Aquinas. As we saw, he considered analogy a useful theological tool, as it is a way of conceiving of (limited) sameness in (infinite) difference, allowing us to use the same terms when speaking of God and creatures. However, the issue of what exactly analogy means is a convoluted one.

There are several dimensions to the problem, among which the principal ones are as follows: (a) Which different kinds of analogies did Aquinas define? (b) Which of these analogies holds between God and creatures? (c) Is such and such a commentator right in interpreting Aquinas’ doctrine of analogy in such and such a way? The latter two questions ultimately depend on (a). (a) is a difficult problem, for Aquinas wrote no independent treatise on analogy: instead, his views on that

205 See Klubertanz (1960, pp. 6-7).
concept are to be found throughout his impressive corpus. The response to (a) and (b) has often been seen through the lens of one’s response to (c); that is, medieval and early modern commentators of Aquinas’ texts have significantly (and perhaps sometimes erroneously) influenced the reception of these texts.

Given these difficulties and the limited scope of this chapter, it is clear that I cannot here purport to provide an independent answer to any of these questions. Instead of pronouncing a verdict on how Thomist analogy is to be interpreted, either in the whole of his corpus or in one specific text, I will introduce here the key feature that will prove relevant in my analysis of Spinoza. This feature is the relative priority and posteriority of the analogates.

As we saw, the names that are predicated analogically of God and creatures designate traditional divine perfections such as goodness. In this theological context, Aquinas’ view on analogy can be characterized in terms of two opposite relations of priority and posteriority. On the one hand, God is metaphysically

---

206 In addition, passages that seem to topically and generally treat analogy as such are, as a rule, tailored to suit the specific question Aquinas is dealing with (Klubertanz, 1960, pp. 35-8). Hence, it would be unwise to take Aquinas’ treatment of analogy in any one key text as representative for his views overall.

207 There are several contemporary systematic treatments of Aquinas’ understanding of analogy that attempt to settle the question on the basis of the Thomist corpus alone. See for instance Lyttkens (1952), Klubertanz (1960), Zimmermann (1964), Montagne (2008). Lyttkens argues that all analogy in Aquinas’ works is based upon the similarity of causes to effects and identifies three cases: (a) an analogy of attribution in which a concept is drawn from God and used to designate creation extrinsically; (b) an analogy in which the image is designated from its archetype, because of an analogous perfection which exists perfectly in God, imperfectly in creatures; and (c) an analogy in which the first Cause is designated from its effects, the perfections of which exist in a higher way in its cause.” According to Klubertanz (1960, p. 16), this “tripartite division represents an oversimplification of the texts”. Zimmermann (1964), in turn, criticizes Lyttkens as well as Klubertanz for their assumption that there is in Aquinas only one kind of properly metaphysical analogy.

208 More precisely, the names which, apart from trinitarian ones, are true of God are those which absolutely designate perfections without any defect (see SCG, I, cap. 30, n. 2 [1975, p. 140]).

209 It should be acknowledged that De Veritate Aquinas considers the analogy of proportionality to be the only that can adequately describe the relation between meanings of words said of God and creatures. Since the analogy of proportionality is a quaternary relation, which - when employed in theology - relates two unknown terms to two known terms (such as, for instance, in the analogy God’s goodness is to God’s essence as a creature’s goodness is to its essence) it may be argued that, within this framework, it does not make sense to say that the two analogates can be compared with respect to their (meta-
prior to creatures, and the goodness of God is the cause of the goodness in creatures (more precisely, God’s goodness is the efficient and final cause of creaturely goodness, as well as its exemplary principle: see ST I, q. 6, art. 4, c [1980b, p. 193]). Metaphysically speaking, goodness is therefore true of God prior to its being true of creatures. On the other hand, this priority is not epistemic. For we come to know what goodness means only by familiarizing ourselves with the goodness exhibited by created things. Goodness is said of God in a metaphysically prior, but epistemically posterior, manner; likewise, the same name is said of creatures when metaphysically posterior but epistemically prior.

Aquinas articulates this difference in different ways, and this brief survey is not intended to be exhaustive. Sometimes he distinguishes between a name being said antecedently of something according to the imposition of the name (\textit{quantum ad nominis impositionem}) and a name being said antecedently of something according to the nature of the thing in question (\textit{quantum ad Rei naturam}) (\textit{De Malo} q. 1, art. 5, ad 19 [1980c, p. 275]). Sometimes he distinguishes between a name’s way of signifying (\textit{modo significandi}) and that which is signified by the name (\textit{res significata}) (e.g. in \textit{De Potentia}, q. 7, art. 2 ad. 7 [1980c, p. 241]). In I \textit{Sent.}, ds. 25, q. 1, art. 2, co., Aquinas in applying this distinction to the denomination ‘person’, writes that, as far as the signified thing is concerned, the denomination is in God prior to its being in creatures, but conversely, as far as the way of signifying is concerned.\textsuperscript{210}

Likewise, the same distinction is drawn between a name’s way of signifying its signified and that in order to signify which the name was imposed (\textit{illud ad quod significandum nomen fuit impositum}: SCG 1, cap. 30, n. 3 [1980b, p. 9]). The name was imposed to signify a pure perfection and it is therefore antecedently

\begin{footnotesize}
physical or epistemic) priority. What must be compared in this analogy is instead the priority of the relations whose similarity the analogy asserts. I will not elaborate on this proposal here. A propos \textit{De Veritate}, Klubertanz, \textit{pace} Cajetan, has convincingly argued that this view is to be regarded as a hypothesis Aquinas entertained early on in his career and then rejected.

\textsuperscript{210} “Respondeo dicendum quod persona dicitur de Deo et creaturis non univisce, sed secundum analogiam; et quantum ad rem significatam per prius est in Deo quam in creaturis, sed quantum ad modum significandi est converso, sicut est etiam de omnibus aliis nominibus quae de Deo et creaturis analogice dicuntur” (1980a, p. 69).\end{footnotesize}
true of God in this respect. Yet, the name’s way of signifying is inevitably mundane, and the name is therefore antecedently true of creatures in this respect. Aquinas adds that, as a result, we are theologically justified in both affirming and negating names of God. For we are justified in affirming that in order to signify which the name was imposed and also justified in negating the name’s way of signifying.

In SCG 1, cap. 34, n. 1 (1980a, p. 10), Aquinas interestingly contrasts this priority-and-posterity of names said of God with the term being (ens) which is said antecedently of substance and consequently of accident in both these respects. This is exactly the position that I will argue that Spinoza occupies with respect to the term ‘infinite’. If one accepts that Spinoza assimilates the relation that holds between God and finite things to the metaphysical relation between a substance and its accidents, one should find this reading plausible.\(^{211}\)

In sum, analogical commonality between names said of God and creatures is possible because despite a name’s lowly origin in the evolution of our languages, we can use it in theological discourse to signify something that we know transcends the perfection the name as we know it signifies. In other words, the origin of language in human experience does not compromise the metaphysical primacy of names insofar as they refer to God. When I, in what follows, emphasize that for Spinoza God is the primary analogate, I therefore mean to highlight that this is so epistemically.\(^{212}\) As we have seen, this is a position

\(^{211}\) Montagnes, in his study of Thomist analogy, claims that the analogy of being is realized along two axes: one horizontal - that of categorical being, and the other vertical - that of the degrees of being constituted by the substances themselves. The analogy situated on the horizontal axis Montagne calls “predicamental analogy”, the one on the vertical axis “transcendental analogy” (2008, pp. 33; 65-6; 72-7; 80-1; 95 et passim). Since Spinoza, on my reading, assimilates the vertical analogy between God and creatures to that which holds between a substance and its accidents, the distinction between predicamental analogy and transcendental analogy, on my reading, collapses in his philosophy.

\(^{212}\) It is important to bear this distinction in mind. When Marion, in his pathbreaking study of Descartes, writes on the topic of causa sui in the first and fourth Responses by Descartes, that “l’analogie fonctionne ici à l’envers de l’analogie théologique. Au lieu de penser la causalité efficiente à partir de Dieu, elle pense Dieu à partir de la causalité efficiente” (1981, p. 429), the primacy Marion intends is metaphysical. It is interesting to note, as Marion has done before us (Ibid., p. 452) that Spinoza is in this respect more traditional than Descartes: he, like Aquinas, maintains that the ratio of any name truly
Aquinas would not endorse, and so it is arguably an original feature of the analogy Spinoza tacitly elaborates in his writings on the infinite.

7.2.2. The analogy of the infinite.

As I noted in Chapter 6, Spinoza considered God’s essence to be unconditionally accessible to all. In his own words: “the human Mind has adequate knowledge [cognitionem] of God’s eternal and infinite essence” (2p47). In maintaining this radical viewpoint, Spinoza departs not only from the tradition of negative theology - as we saw embraced by Maimonides, for whom knowledge of God’s essence is unquestionably out of reach for all, but also from the more optimistic position of Aquinas. For in maintaining that we can have adequate knowledge of God’s essence, Spinoza is more radically optimistic about our epistemic situation vis-à-vis the divine object than Aquinas, who would reject the claim that our knowledge of God adequately represents God’s essence. For this reason,

said of God is antecedently (per prius) in God. Yet, Marion does not go so far as to treat any name truly said of God in Spinoza’s theology as a primary analogate.

Spinoza was of the opinion that knowledge of God’s existence is available a priori already at the time when the KV was written. See KV, I, 7.

On Aquinas’ view, while we can know propositions about God, or his essence, to be true - propositions such as “There is a God” (ST I, q. 2, art. 3 [2011, pp. 170-171] or even “God’s essence is identical to his being [esse]” (ST I, q. 3, art. 3 [2011, pp. 176-177]), we cannot, in this life, know who God himself is, or what God’s essence is really like.

Aquinas distinguishes between things which are known in themselves [nota in se] according to themselves and for us [secundum se et quoad nos] and things which are only known in themselves according to themselves [nota secundum se, non quoad nos] (ST I, q. 2. art. 1, co. [2011, p. 170; 1980b, p. 187]). Since we do not know exactly what God is, propositions about God are not known in themselves to us. The following epistemic situation emerges. We know God to be truly wise, good and so on, but we do not know what divine wisdom and goodness are truly like, for we only gain knowledge of such attributes by familiarizing ourselves with creaturely perfections. While these perfections are indicative of a preeminent perfection in God (for perfections are predicated analogously of God and creatures), they do not express (exprimat: ST I, q. 13, art. 1, co. [1980b, p. 202]) or represent (repraesentant: ST I, q. 13, art. 2 [1980b, p. 202]) the divine essence. Perhaps one could say that they point at it or refer to it without explaining it.

But, importantly, for Spinoza, to have adequate knowledge of x is exactly to be able to explain x. (Such explanation is paradigmatically given by providing a cause for x.) Hence, whatever knowledge we have of God’s essence in the Thomist picture, it is not adequate by Spinoza’s standards. Nor is it adequate by Aquinas’ own standards. For if it were, the highest knowledge of God (for humans in this life) would not be knowledge of God as being unknown, that is, knowledge of a God who does not perfectly correspond to any way we may characterize him in this life.

Étienne Gilson (2007, pp. 71—85) helpfully situates the meaning of Aquinas’ dictum “God’s being is unknown” (esse Dei ignotum est) in the context of his theological
Spinoza’s optimism as regards knowledge of God breaks with tradition by overstepping the boundaries within which theological knowledge was generally confined. And, even more surprisingly, Spinoza’s mature position is that we have a better grasp of God than of ourselves. Indeed, he claims that even inadequate knowledge of any singular thing involves “adequate and perfect” knowledge of God’s essence. This essence is repeatedly described as infinite. Therefore, it makes sense to ask how the word ‘infinite’ works when predicated of substance, on the one hand, and of modes, on the other.

For us to predicate ‘infinity’ equivocally (after the via negativa of Maimonides) in the two contexts would mean for us to project the term beyond our grasp into the unknown when we use it of God. But for Spinoza, God’s nature is a privileged object of knowledge in the sense that we can know it “adequately and perfectly” (2p46). And we know it as such (as it is essentially), we know it to be infinite. This means that Spinoza does not think that discourse about God’s nature can proceed by equivocating on words whose meanings are only known when they are

practice. In Gilson’s words (p. 83) : “[A]près avoir fait effort, comme il se doit, pour attribuer à Dieu l'essence la plus parfaite qui se puisse concevoir, le théologien doit encore s'imposer une deuxième série d'efforts, incomparablement plus difficile, pour s’interdire de se représenter Dieu sous l'aspect d'aucune de ses créatures, si noble soit-elle. En somme, après s'être efforcé de concevoir Dieu à partir de ses créatures, il faut s’efforcer plus encore de ne pas le concevoir comme l'une quelconque de ses créatures, les seuls êtres pourtant que nous concevions vraiment. [...] [C]'est cela même que Saint Thomas nomme, avec Denis, la ‘théologie négative’. Celle-ci n’a pas la théologie en moins, car si l'on n’affirmait rien de Dieu, qu’aurait-on à nier pour le transcender ?” (One common reference for Aquinas’ claim that our best knowledge of God consists in knowing God as he is unknown is In Boeth. De Trin. q. 1. art. 2. ad. 1 [1980d, p. 521].)

Although the mainstream position in contemporary scholarship on Aquinas’ work is that we cannot know of God what he is (or differently put his “quiddity”), this was not always so. As Igor Agostini (2009, pp. 245—281) has shown, Thomists within the Dominican order (Capreolus, Durand de Saint-Pourçain, Hervé Nédéllec, Cajetan and Ferrarese) sought to provide an interpretation of Aquinas’ philosophy such that it does not appear equivalent with one of the propositions condemned by bishop Temper in 1277. According to these Dominican interpreters of Aquinas’ thought, Aquinas did not maintain that we can only know of God that he is, but not what he is. Agostini (Ibid., p. 259) neatly distinguishes their position from that of contemporary scholars.

On Spinoza’s own estimation of his philosophy, his method breaks with tradition in taking God as the point of departure, rather than as the terminus of inquiry. That Spinoza himself regarded his own philosophy in this light is implied by Tschirnhaus report to Leibniz, according to which Spinoza had said that: “vulgus philosophicum [to which circle Aquinas must here be classified] incipere a creaturis, Cartesium incepisse a mente, se incipere a Deo”. See Stein (1890, pp. 282-3).
predicated of things that are not God. For if God is to be an entity we can know adequately and perfectly, then we should not know his essence to be infinite by equivocation. For by knowing it to be infinite only by equivocation, we would not know its infinity in an adequate, let alone perfect, way.

A natural conjecture would then be that the sense of the word is the same - whether it is predicated of the substance, its modes or abstract objects such as numbers. If the meaning of the word ‘infinite’ is exactly the same when it is justly predicated of substance, attributes and modes, Spinoza’s use of religious language would (in this important context) be entirely univocal. Let us here revisit the Letter on the Infinite (Letter 12) to show more clearly why this is not so. In what follows, I will argue, on the basis of this letter, that the infinite is not predicated univocally of substance, modes and beings of reason. Instead, I will suggest, it is predicated analogically of substance, attributes and modes. That is, the term ‘infinite’ is predicated across these different metaphysical categories in a way that is not univocal, but where the meanings are nonetheless connected. I will also suggest that infinity is said of beings of reason in a completely different sense than it is (adequately) predicated of substance, attributes and modes.

7.2.2.1. Letter 12 and the analogy of attribution between substance and modes.

In the beginning of Letter 12, Spinoza claims that:

Everyone has always found the problem of the Infinite very difficult, indeed insoluble. This is because they have not always distinguished between [i][a] what is infinite as a consequence of its own nature, or by the force of its definition, and [i][b] what has no bounds, not indeed by the force of its essence, but by the force of its cause. And also, because they have not distinguished between [ii][a] what is called infinite because it has no limits and [ii][b] that whose parts we cannot explain or equate with any number, though we know its maximum and minimum. Finally, they have not distinguished between [iii][a] what we can only understand, but not imagine and [iii][b] what we can also imagine (C. 201: Enumeration added).
Making these distinctions, Spinoza claims, will allow us to discern which infinity is divisible and which is not, and which infinity can be conceived as being greater or lesser than another infinity, and which cannot be so conceived (C. 201-202). In order to make the distinctions [i]-[iii] Spinoza deploys four key concepts: substance, mode, eternity and duration. Substance is that whose essence involves existence and which therefore cannot be understood unless as eternal and infinite. It should be recalled that the existence of something that exists in virtue of its essence is called eternity (see 1d8). A mode is something whose existence does not so follow from its essence. An existing thing that does not exist in virtue of its essence has duration.

All modes inhere in the substance which causes them. Yet, since a mode’s essence does not involve existence any mode can be conceived in abstraction from its necessitating ground. When it is considered abstractly, it can be conceived as either existing or as not existing. When we consider modes in abstraction from the substance we are considering them as they appear: as contingently existing singular things. To consider modes in abstraction from their necessity is a way of imagining them (see Chapters 4 and 5).\footnote{Spinoza’s account of the imagination is based on the idea that things appear to our sensual apparatus and imprint their images on this apparatus, images which we retain even when the thing in question is no longer in contact with our bodies. The imagination is then the faculty which cognizes with the help of such images, and its proper tools, alone. For a similar “sensualist” account of the imagination in one of Spinoza’s predecessors, see the Sixth Meditation of Descartes (AT 57-8). For a lucid treatment of the imagination in Spinoza’s oeuvre, see de Deugd (1966).}

As mentioned in previous chapters, in order to imagine modes more easily and exactly, we employ aids of the imagination. Spinoza enumerates three aids. In order to “determine quantity so as to imagine it more easily”, we use the aid of Measure. (Extension, when conceived concretely, is indivisible and immeasurable, on Spinoza’s view.)\footnote{Indeed, Spinoza considered Descartes’ to have erred in thinking that he could infer divisibility from extension. See Stein (1890, p. 283). See also Chapter 4, section 3.1.} In order to “determine” the duration of modes, we use another aid of the imagination: Time. And lastly, we employ Number, whereby we can more easily consider classes of modes (C. 203).

Although I cannot dwell on this matter here, it is interesting that for Spinoza the
imagination is our faculty for abstract thinking: it alone enables formal manipulations of numbers and the like. Mathematical thinking would not be possible if the necessitating ground of all existence was not first abstracted.218

I would like to suggest that ‘infinity’ means different things when predicated of substance, modes and aids of the imagination. These three different senses correspond to the distinction made by Spinoza at the onset of the letter in the following way. The infinity of substance corresponds to [i][a] and [iii][a]. The infinity of modes corresponds to [i][b] and [iii][b].

[ii][a] is the kind of infinity that obtains when something lacks either an upper or a lower bound, whereas Spinoza in [ii][b] is thinking of bounded infinities. It is true of the substance, being essentially infinite, that it has no limits and one may therefore think that [ii][a] accurately describes it as well. However, a closer inspection of the text indicates that Spinoza does not consider either [ii][a] or [ii][b] to be applicable to the substance. The substance’s nature is unbounded in an ontological sense. Its infinity means that no reality can be denied of it (see 1p8s). However, on my reading, the different kinds of unboundedness Spinoza is distinguishing between in [ii] are both formal in character. On my reading, it is since [ii][a] and [ii][b] are both formally, rather than ontologically, established infinities that Spinoza hesitates to call both [ii][a] as well as [ii][b] infinite.

First, Spinoza hesitates to call [ii][a] (and probably [ii][b] as well) infinite as he introduces the distinction between them. For there he distinguishes between “what is called infinite [infinitum dicitur] because it has no limits and that whose parts we cannot explain or equate [NS: determine or express] with any number, though we know the maximum and minimum” (C. 201; G. IV/53: Emphasis added). Toward the end of the letter, Spinoza again indicates that infinity is duly predicated both of what is infinite in virtue of its nature and what is infinite in virtue of its cause, while “others” - presumably mathematical infinities “are called infinite - or if you prefer, indefinite - because they cannot be equated with any

218 This would perhaps make for an interesting comparison between Spinoza and contemporary constructivist accounts of mathematics.
number though they can be conceived to be greater or lesser” (C. 205: Emphasis added). Here, Spinoza is clearly thinking of [ii][b]. Spinoza’s hesitation about whether to characterize [ii][a] and [ii][b] as infinite or indefinite indicates that he considered the infinities we can establish formally as infinite only in name.

This is natural given his metamathematical views. For Spinoza, numbers are aids of the imagination and that whose infinity is established in numerical or similarly formal ways is thus a construct of the imagination. Regardless of whether it is bounded or unbounded, a formally established infinity would always be imaginary, on Spinoza’s view. For this reason the nominal “infinity” of aids of the imagination corresponds to [ii][a] as well as to [ii][b]. Since judgments made entirely in terms of the imagination cannot truly be said of the substance, 219 formally established “infinities” cannot truly be said of the substance. The word ‘infinity’ is applied equivocally to formally established infinities and real infinite things. Since for Spinoza the imagination - our faculty for mathematical thinking - cannot be employed to undertake theological or metaphysical investigations, neither [ii][a] nor [ii][b] need be discussed in this context. Let me instead present the other two senses of ‘infinite’ as said of substance and modes, and then see whether they have anything in common, which would justify attributing an analogical use of ‘infinity’ to Spinoza.

In brief, on Spinoza’s view, once one understands what it means to be substance, one will realize that any substance is necessarily infinite (1p7). In the Ethics, Spinoza presents two defences of the infinity of substance, only one of which relies on the premise that substances cannot share attributes. The first demonstration (1p8d) can be broken down as follows:

P1: A substance must exist either as infinite or finite.
P2: If it exists as finite, this can only be because it is limited by something of the same attribute.

219 The imagination is for Spinoza the complement of intellectual perception: “what is perceived with a true mind, without words and images, is understood” (TTP, IV, [32], C. 133; cf. 2p40s). Knowledge of God, which must always be intellectual and never imaginary (Letter 12, C. 203; Letter 56, C. II. 423).
P3: In order for a thing to be limited by something of the same attribute, the thing to be limited must share an attribute with the limiting thing.
P4: Substances cannot share attributes (as per 1p5).
C: The substance must exist as infinite.

In the first scholium to this proposition, Spinoza adds that this hypothetico-deductive syllogism is, at bottom, redundant; the infinity of substance, Spinoza here claims, “follows from eternity alone” (1p8s1).

Spinoza’s rather elliptical argument in 1p8s1 is as follows:

Since being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature, it follows from P7 alone that every substance must be infinite.

I will attempt to break down Spinoza’s reasoning. At first glance, it appears to be the following:

P1) The substance is eternal (1p7).
P2) When something is eternal its essence is unreservedly affirmed in existence. That is, whatever perfections/realities are included in the essence of the eternal thing, are actualized in existence.
P3) If an essence is finite, it negates some perfection.
C) Something that is finite (i.e. negates perfection) cannot be eternal.

This inference is clearly invalid. For, on Spinoza’s view, a thing is eternal when the perfections that characterize it essentially are unconditionally actualized in existence. But why could the eternal thing’s essence not negate those perfections that do not belong to it? Of course, the conclusion would follow on the assumption that anything eternal has all perfections (i.e. all its perfections are “affirmed” by its essence). But to have all perfections is exactly to negate no perfections, and thus be infinite. So, if this is supposed to be an argument, it should not assume that anything eternal is infinite, since this is exactly the conclusion Spinoza draws from the argument. Nonetheless, it is not clear that 1p8s1 really provides an argument. Perhaps Spinoza is instead spelling out certain
relations among concepts. By attending to the concept of eternity, we will realize that in order for something to be eternal, it will have to possess all perfections. Indeed, this has to be the case if the limitation of finite things by other finite things (1d2) is always infringing upon how the essences of such things are “expressed” in existence: that is, on to what extent such things are able to produce their essential effects. If an essence can only be absolutely affirmed in existence by being infinite, and if having an essence absolutely affirmed in existence is something that is required for one to be eternal, then one would have to be infinite in order to be eternal.

Another way for the premises to entail the conclusion would be by means of the supplementary premise of perfection monism:

P*: There is one and only one thing whose essence includes all perfections.

If P* can be accepted, then the following reasoning seems valid: if the thing to be judged eternal is to negate any perfection, it cannot have any perfection essentially. But then it cannot be eternal. In order to have a nature that essentially possesses perfection - which it must have if it is to be eternal -, the eternal thing must be infinite.

The following objection immediately arises: Does this not entail that finite things such as ourselves are not, in our own right, proper subjects of perfection? However, this objection assumes exactly that infinity and perfection cannot be predicated analogically. On my interpretation, the perfection of finite things is God’s perfection. As we saw in the preceding Part of this thesis, the perfection of finite things is to be modes of a substance that necessarily possesses all perfections. That the perfection of finite things is thus parasitic upon God’s perfection appears to be supported by 1p11s, where Spinoza states: “For things that come from external causes - whether they consist of many parts or of a few - owe all the perfection or reality they have to the power of the external cause”. Although Spinoza maintains perfection monism, he is nonetheless in position to articulate and defend a sophisticated ideal of perfection for humans. The problem
of how to square perfection monism with human perfectionism will be treated further in the following chapter.

At any rate, it is clear that, on Spinoza’s view, infinity is predicated of the substance by a conceptual necessity. Modes, by contrast, are infinite not in virtue of their natures, but in virtue of “the causes in which they inhere” (C. 205).

Before we look at the more specific features of Spinoza’s system, it is worth noting the general schemas of predication that, on my reading, are available in Spinozism. Some predicates can be truly said only of the substance but not of its modes (for instance, that it is essentially one of a kind, or absolutely infinite). Some predicates can be truly said of the modes but do not ripple down to the cause in which they inhere. These are the predicates that express exclusively extrinsic properties, such as evil. For on Spinoza’s view, evil is a negation, and more specifically, the negation of a subjectively erected standard (see Chapter 2). By contrast, some predicates can be truly said of the modes because they are true of the substance. Such predicates I have proposed to call transcendental. In Chapter 1 I argued that perfection is the paradigmatic example of such a property in Spinozism. Transcendental predicates cut across substance-attribute-modes distinctions: that is, they transcend the basic categories of Spinoza’s metaphysics. But as we have seen, in Letter 12 Spinoza argues that modes can truly be said to be infinite because their immanent cause is infinite. The mere fact that infinity is said of modes because it is true of the cause in which they inhere - the substance, that is - indicates that infinity operates analogically. Let me in what follows specify more exactly the analogical relation that holds between substance and modes with respect to the term ‘infinite’.

The modes are infinite either collectively (the finite ones) or distributively (the infinite ones). Finite modes can be conceived in abstraction from the substance as well as concretely and then as necessarily inhering in it: a finite mode can clearly

---

220 This is contrary to one of the principal grounds for Bayle’s description of Spinoza’s philosophical system as “the most monstrous hypothesis that could be imagined” in his Dictionary (2014, p. 91). On Bayle’s interpretation of Spinoza, God is the ultimate subject of inherence of all the properties of his modes (see Ibid., pp. 92-105).
be conceived without one integrating it into an infinite causal chain. That is, presumably, how we most often conceive of singular things, even on Spinoza’s view. But it must be admitted that this principle does not apply as neatly in the case of the infinite modes. Motion and rest is for Spinoza an infinite mode. Could one think of motion and rest as being only partially applicable to some place in space? If extension is unified (a universe), this situation does not even appear to be conceivable. No matter how this difficulty is to be resolved, infinity is clearly predicated of finite modes mediately (upon the acknowledgement of the infinity of that in which they inhere) and by a metaphysical, but not a conceptual, necessity.

When the mode is adequately conceived as inhering in an infinite cause - the substance - infinity as predicated of the substance and infinity as predicated of the totality of the finite modes is not identical in sense, but they are not infinite in two senses that are completely unrelated, either. For this reason, the (adequate) predication of infinity of the substance and its modes may be called analogical.

As we saw previously, Aquinas appealed to the analogy of perfections in order to explain how there could be some commonality between goodness (say) as said of God and human beings, in spite of the fact that God and human beings are infinitely different. As a mean between terms predicated in totally different senses (equivocation) and terms predicated in the very same sense (univocation), analogical predication retains both some limited - but crucial - similarity as well as the utter difference between the finite and the infinite.²²¹

But does it make sense to speak of an analogy in the context of substance and modes in Spinoza’s philosophy? Let me first consider one major objection against the possibility that the word ‘infinite’ may be predicated analogically of the substance and its modes. This objection is structural in nature and depends on the

²²¹ As Mascall (1949, p. 100) points out in commenting on the (Thomist) formula *simpliciter diversa et eadem secundum quid*: “[analogy] is the application of a concept to different beings in ways that are simply diverse from each other and are only the same in a certain respect”.
distinction between naturing and natured nature. This key\textsuperscript{222} distinction appears first in the KV I, 8-9, and reappears in the \textit{Ethics} (1p29s). In the latter text, it reads as follows:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{[B]y Natura naturans} we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e. (by P14C1 and P17C2), God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause. But by \textit{Natura naturata} I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any attributes, i.e., all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God and can neither be nor be conceived without God.
\end{quote}

If there is to be any analogy across ontological realms in Spinozism, this analogy will not connect what is God with what isn’t God. For God is all there is. Instead, any analogy that shoulders the role of connecting the divine with the not-so-divine in Spinozism will connect the totality of what God is with partial aspects of God, with things that are not identical with all there is to God. The totality of God is naturing nature, for only that which is all there is is perpetually shielded from influence from without, and so a “free cause”, in the Spinozist sense of ‘free’. That which is not wholly God, but nonetheless \textit{is}, is a mode of God. (Although I cannot comment on this further here, it is interesting that in 1p29s, the attributes are treated as identical with the totality of what God is.)

Thus, against the possibility that the predication could be analogical, one may object that as a result of the distinction just cited, the preeminence on which analogical predication is founded, crumbles. For analogical predication presupposes that all perfections exist “preeminently” in God. Yet, nothing that we traditionally consider a perfection or virtue in modes such as humans - goodness, wisdom, charity, courage - could conceivably apply to what Spinoza calls \textit{naturing nature}. Because all these characteristics pertain to the intellect or to the will, and Spinoza does not consider \textit{naturing nature} to be characterizable in terms of modes such as intellect or will. Instead, such things are exactly “modes of God’s attributes” that follow from these “insofar as they are in God”.

\textsuperscript{222} For an alternative approach which dismisses the significance of the distinction, see Bennett (1984, p. 119).
Indeed, Spinoza explicitly states that, even if God’s nature could be adequately spoken of as possessing will and intellect, our will and God’s will would differ from each other as much as the barking dog differs from the celestial composition (1p17s). In other words, if one employed terms that primarily characterize natured nature (such as terms which characterize the modes of intellect or will: wisdom or goodness, say) to naturing nature, there could only be a superficial agreement between these terms. If such predicates could be applied jointly to naturing and natured nature, Spinoza maintains that they would be said equivocally in the contexts of these two ontological realms.

In essence, on Aquinas’ view, analogy proceeds by (1) identifying creaturely perfections through experience; (2) realizing that these perfections exist “preeminently” in God and (3) analogically predicing said perfections of God. Spinoza would dispute (2) and hence he could not possibly endorse that words predicated jointly of God and finite beings are predicated of God in this way.

In this respect, Spinoza’s position is like that of Maimonides, and opposed to that of Aquinas. That is, like Maimonides but unlike Aquinas, Spinoza denies that one can begin with what necessarily belongs to something which is caused and conceived by something other than itself (natured nature) and proceed by analogy to expand one’s knowledge of that which is self-caused and self-conceived (naturing nature).

Nonetheless, I would suggest that the analogy of attribution (also known as the analogy of relation) fits the relation between infinity as predicated of substance and modes. Of course, the taxonomy of analogies originates with Aquinas and

---

223 Following the reading of Koyré (1950, pp. 50-9).
224 For Spinoza would dispute that our traditional virtues are real perfections, in the sense of “affirmations or realities or that which can be [sc. adequately] conceived (My translation)”: Stein, (1890, p. 283). See Chapters 1 and 2 for this issue.
his commentators (and most notably Cajetan, in De Analogia Nominum).\textsuperscript{226} Nonetheless I hope that the description of the analogy of attribution which I provide here is sufficiently elemental to be acceptable to all, regardless of their position on which sort of analogy Aquinas held to be properly theological.

In the analogy of attribution (\textit{analogia attributionis}) there is a prime analogate which has the sense of the term primarily. The other analogate(s) has the sense of the term only secondarily, by being in some way related to the first term. One canonical (Aristotelian) example is health.\textsuperscript{227} ‘Healthy’ is said of an animal, medicine and urine - but it is primarily said of the animal, and secondarily said of medicine and urine. We call medicine healthy when it stands in a causal relation to the health of an animal; we call urine healthy when it stands in a symptomatic relation to the health of an animal. This kind of analogy is applicable when we know the meaning of the word as predicated of the secondary analogate(s) only because we are familiar with the meaning of the word as predicated of the primary analogate. In order for this to be the case we must naturally first know what the word in question means when predicated of the primary analogate. If this description is to straightforwardly fit the case of infinity when said of the divine nature and modes in Spinoza’s philosophy, Spinoza must diverge from Aquinas on a crucial point.

As already stated, for Aquinas, a name is predicated of God antecedently insofar as the thing signified is concerned, but consequentially insofar as the way of signification is concerned. That God has the perfection a name expresses is a

\textsuperscript{226} Klubertanz maintains that Aquinas’ thinking on the matter evolved and that Aquinas’ view that the analogy of attribution is inapplicable to the context of God and creatures was rejected in his later works. Likewise, Montagnes (2008, pp. 65-81) submits that Aquinas’ texts on analogy divides into two groups: In I Sent. ds. 35, q. 1, art. 4 and De Veritate, q. 2, a. 11, on the one hand, and SCG I, cap. 34; Comp. theol. I c. 27, De potentia q. 7, art. 7 and ST I, q. 13, art. 5 on the other. Both groups of texts agree that names are said of God and creatures neither univocally, nor equivocally, but analogically. They differ in which analogy is admissible and which is not: in the former group, but not in the latter group, the analogy of attribution is inadmissible.

\textsuperscript{227} According to Lyttkens (1952, pp. 52-8), Aristotle in his metaphysics uses ‘being’, ‘medical’ and ‘healthy’ as examples of names predicated not by analogy, but προς ὑπ’ ἀναλογίαν. Aristotle’s προς ὑπ’ ἀναλογίαν predication nonetheless became the template for the analogy of attribution.
metaphysically prior fact, but it is epistemically posterior to our knowledge of the same perfection as realized in things other than God. For Spinoza, by contrast, God’s infinity is both a metaphysically prior fact and an epistemically prior object of knowledge. In other words, when infinity is said of God’s nature and things which are different from this nature, God’s nature is the primary analogate, metaphysically as well as epistemically.

Indeed, for Spinoza, in Letter 12, we know what the word ‘infinite’ means when predicated of modes because we first know what it means when it is predicated of the substance. The substance cannot be conceived unless as infinite. Once we have acquired the proper concept of a substance, we can predicate infinity mediately of its modes as well. We predicate infinity of modes in order to express that they are the immanent effects of an infinite cause. The substance is the prime analogate - that is, infinity as said of the substance has epistemic priority. Infinity is then derivatively predicated of modes which are therefore the secondary analogates.

This is the significant difference between Spinoza and the Thomist tradition that I aimed to highlight. For Spinoza as well as for tradition analogy is a tool that enables one to use the same language to speak of beings that are infinitely different. But whereas for Aquinas (and others) we approach God’s nature - which nonetheless remains ultimately and absolutely unknown - by the means of analogical predication of terms with which we are familiar through experience, for Spinoza, the analogy, as it were, goes the other way. For Aquinas, analogy will allow us to say that God is F without claiming to know exactly what F means when said of God. For Spinoza, by contrast, we know perfectly well what we mean by calling God’s nature infinite. What we do not yet know - the sense in which the modes can be said to be infinite - we come to know by analogical predication. It is not God’s nature that needs to be elucidated by the help of analogy. In Letter 12, Spinoza predicates infinity analogously of substance and modes in order to clarify the status of the modes.
7.2.2.2. The analogy of proportionality between substance and attributes, on the one hand, and attributes and modes, on the other.

How about the infinity predicated of the attributes? In Letter 12 Spinoza does not mention the attributes. But on the basis of his statements elsewhere, it may be asked if the predication of infinity is analogous also with respect to the attributes. If the infinity in kind of the attributes entails the collective infinity of the modes (that is, if the view I have called Plenitude holds), then the infinity of the attributes and that of the modes can be considered to stand in a relation corresponding to that of the infinity of substance and attributes. In order to see that this is so, let us revisit the key passage: 1p16d. Here, Spinoza states that:

since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes (by D6), each of which also expresses an essence infinite in its own kind, from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes.

The modes are thus infinite because the attributes are infinite in kind. This shows that, if infinity in kind is the complement of finitude in kind, the limitation of which 1d2 speaks cannot be purely conceptual. 1d2 reads:

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 of 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.

In order for the infinite productivity of each attribute to follow from its being infinite in kind, Spinoza’s definition of finitude in kind must entail that something is finite in kind when another thing can limit it and hinder it from producing an effect that the thing would otherwise have produced, and infinite in kind when this condition fails to obtain. Although Spinoza does not use the term ‘finite’ in this context it is useful to consider the first (and only) axiom of the Fourth Part of the Ethics. Here Spinoza writes: “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” (4a1).
If something is finite in kind it can be surpassed by something else. If it can be surpassed by something else in some respect, it is inferior to that thing in this respect. Importantly, as 4a1 indicates, Spinoza sees this relation of superiority and inferiority through the lens of a power dynamics. If something is finite in kind (as all singular things and *a fortiori* all human beings are) then that which is superior has the power to destroy that which is inferior. As we saw, Spinoza uses the example of comparative size in 1d2. But a body that is greater than another is not only superior to it in the respect of size: more importantly, it has the power to destroy the momentum of another body and take it along with it on its trajectory, and so on. That which is weaker can be deprived of the exercise of its power by that which is stronger. That the attributes are infinite in kind entails not only that the attributes cannot be conceived as inferior to things like themselves but also that there is nothing that can interfere with them producing infinite effects. This shows that the meaning of infinity in kind cannot be simply that which is not subject to any conceptual limitation. That the attributes are infinite in kind additionally means that nothing can rein in their infinite productivity.

It transpires that just as there are collectively infinite attributes on account of the substance’s absolute infinity, so there are collectively infinite modes on account of the attribute’s distributive infinity. Absolute infinity by definition (1d6) entails the possession of collectively and distributively infinite attributes and similarly, infinity in kind entails possession of collectively infinite modes. Evidently, there is a similarity between the infinity of the substance and the infinity of the attributes: each entails the collective infinity of something. But that whose collective infinity their infinity entails differ enormously in the two cases. For unlike attributes, modes are not infinite in kind. Hence, one may say that the absolute infinity of the substance stands in the same relation to the collective infinity of the attributes as the distributive infinity of the attributes stands to the collective infinity of the modes. Formally, this four-term relation corresponds to
the analogy of proportionality which Aquinas in *De Veritate* considered the only properly theological analogy.\(^{228}\)

The analogy of proportionality is not a proportion between two terms but a similarity between two relations. It says that a stands to b as c stands to d. The example Aquinas uses in *De Veritate* is that vision is said of corporeal vision as well as of intellectual vision. More precisely, vision stands in the same relation to the eye as understanding (intellectus) to the mind (“nomen visus dicitur de visu corporali et intellectu eo quod sicut visus est in oculo ita intellectus in mente” [De Veritate, q. 2, art. 11, c.]).\(^{229}\)

One major difference between Spinoza and the Thomist outlook (on one widespread interpretation at least) on this analogy is worth noting. Mascall (1949, pp.109-10) describes the Thomist analogy of proportionality as consisting in the assertion of a sameness of proportion between two relations, one of which is constituted by unknown relata.\(^{230}\) For instance, the goodness of God stands in the same relation to the being of God as the goodness of Caligula stands to the being

---

\(^{228}\) Marion writes, à propos the analogy of proportionality, (1981, p. 83) that this quaternary relation was the only analogy for which the Greeks reserved the term ἀναλογία. The specific taxonomical divide between an analogy of attribution and the analogy of proportionality (assimilated with the type Aquinas elsewhere calls calls analogia secundum esse et secundum intentionem) - only one of which is properly theological - in Aquinas’ thought was popularized by Cajetan in his *De Analogia Nominorum*. (Cajetan also considered some other species of impure or disingenuous analogies.) Cajetan’s reading of Aquinas has been widely questioned, see Klubertanz (1960). Marion (1981, pp. 93-5) helpfully explains the rationale behind Cajetan’s rejection of the applicability of the analogy of attribution for theological purposes, and the difference between his position and Aquinas’, in the following words: “Saint Thomas (en termes cajétaniens) pense que la perfection est intrinsèquement constitutive de la créature, parce que, sans la moindre contradiction, elle appartient per prius à Dieu; bref parce que la déficience de la participation résume l’essence la plus intime de la créature, la créature elle-même se réfère ontiquement à Dieu. Cajetan (en langage thomiste) suppose que, entre l’attribution per prius de la perfection à Dieu et sa participation réelle, puisque déficiente, par la créature, il faut choisir : ainsi, avant toute critique et toute réinterprétation se trouve manqué le sens profond de la doctrine de saint Thomas: que le plus constitutif de la créature s’inscrit par avance et de plein droit en Dieu” (pp. 94-5). For an introduction to Cajetan’s position in the context of his polemics against Duns Scotus and Henri le Grand, see Montagnes (2008, pp. 115-50).\(^{229}\) For a comment of the presence of this analogy in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (1096 b 29f), see Lyttkens (1952, p. 49).

\(^{230}\) The practice of relating relata, at least one of which is unknown, by the means of analogy, thereby expanding one’s knowledge of an unknown sphere of reality, originates with Plato and Aristotle: see Lyttkens (1952, pp. 97-8).
of Caligula. Although we know neither the goodness of God or the being of God, we can nonetheless somehow assert that there is a relation between them, and that this relation is similar to that between the goodness of Caligula and his being. For Spinoza, the absolute infinity of the substance stands in the same relation to the collective infinity of the attributes as the distributive infinity of the attributes stand to the infinity of the modes. But it is not the case that the relata in either relation are unknown. We know primarily God’s nature. Indeed, it is since we know this nature to be infinite that we can infer the infinity of the modes. In this respect, then, it is not the case that predication of the term ‘infinite’ in Spinozism corresponds to the analogy of proportionality as this analogy was defined by the scholastic tradition (on this interpretation of the analogy in question). However, that this is so does not defeat my interpretation. My purpose with investigating whether Spinoza’s predication of infinity can be considered analogical was not to fit Spinoza’s predications of the infinite into a straightjacket of medieval metalinguistic classification schemes but rather to explore the surprising role an anonymous analogy - namely that of the infinite - shoulders within his system.

In sum, infinity is predicated of the substance as well as the attributes by a conceptual necessity. But infinity is not predicated in the same sense of substance and attributes: for substance, infinity means possession of all conceivable attributes, whereas for attributes it entails that all the modes that an infinite intellect can conceive are actualized in them. In each case, Spinoza’s analogical practice with respect to the term ‘infinity’ in Letter 12 presupposes that God’s infinity is known primarily. But this fundamental claim - that God’s infinity is apparent to us - seems exceedingly difficult to justify. In what follows I will discuss in what sense God’s nature can enjoy epistemic priority.

7.2.3. The epistemic priority of God.

We can come to know the modes’ infinity by taking as our point of departure God’s infinity. But in order to acquire a concept of the modes’ infinity by analogy, one must first have acquired knowledge of God insofar as he is absolutely infinite. To know God insofar as he is absolutely infinite is to know God as he specified in 1d6. But, as the deductive ancestry of 1p16 shows, Spinoza
takes this absolute infinity to entail plenitude. And it is because reality must be plenary that there are infinitely many modes. Unlike knowledge of God *tout court*, knowledge of God insofar as he is absolutely infinite is *not* inevitable.

Spinoza certainly claims that since human beings have ideas of singular things (their own bodies as well as other bodies), they know God’s eternal and infinite essence (2p45). Yet one is to differentiate between the knowledge of an attribute (say, of extension) which is presupposed by any knowledge of an extended mode, and the knowledge of an attribute qua an attribute - that is, qua an essence of God.\(^{231}\) I will call the former knowledge veiled, the latter unveiled. (The two different ways in which God may be known could also be called extensional and intensional, since in the former what is known is indeed God, but one does not recognize him as God. However, since these technical terms are used elsewhere in this thesis, I will not apply them to this case.)

The knowledge of a divine, infinite and eternal essence that knowledge of any mode involves (as per 2p45) is not knowledge of the fact that what is known is indeed a divine, infinite or eternal essence. It is not knowledge of God’s nature *as* God’s nature. Spinoza’s claim that we inevitably possess knowledge of God (in 2p47) is therefore more theologically modest than it might appear at first sight. It only says that in order to know an actually existing singular thing I must have preliminary knowledge of the attribute of which that thing is a mode. That claim is a transcendental claim; it is about what conditions the possibility of knowledge of singular things. On Spinoza’s view (as on Kant’s), extension is a prerequisite for knowledge of individual bodies (on Kant’s view, space is an intuitional form; Spinoza is nowhere as explicit concerning the status of our “transcendental” knowledge of the attributes).\(^{232}\) But presumably, unless we had some preliminary

---

\(^{231}\) Relatedly, commentators have pointed out that the knowledge of God’s essence which an idea of a singular thing involves (in 2p45) is knowledge of the attribute under which the singular thing in question is conceived, not God’s essence defined as constituted by infinitely many attributes. On this issue, Curley C. 481 n. 68 refers to Gueroult (1969, part 1, p. 54).

\(^{232}\) Kant (1998) discusses intuitional forms in the Transcendental Aesthetic - I do not pretend that I am here contributing in any significant way neither to the scholarship on Kant nor to that concerning the Spinoza-Kant connection. My present purpose is only to distinguish veiled knowledge of God from its unveiled counterpart.
notion or intuition about extension we could not form ideas of bodies. Of course, however, we can have the requisite spatial notion or intuition without equating extension with one of God’s infinite and eternal essences.

Nor do we know, on account of our knowledge of a body (say), that extension is infinite and eternal. Nothing about our daily experience of bodies speaks for an interpretation of space as infinite. This does not exclude, of course, that physics may speak in favor of the infinity of space. I am merely emphasizing that extension is not such that by merely perceiving objects in it (or, more accurately, modified as it)\textsuperscript{233} we necessarily conceive of it as infinite. It is instead Spinoza’s definition of God as absolutely infinite which speaks in favor of infinitizing extension. Since extension can be conceived as infinite and eternal, it is a candidate for an attribute of God. And since God is absolutely infinite he, as it were, appropriates all attributes. Hence, we know extension (for example) to be an attribute of God, to be infinite and to be eternal only if we first know God to be absolutely infinite.

In the scholium to 2p47, Spinoza adds: “From this we see that God’s infinite essence and his eternity are known to all.” But we can now rephrase this as follows: Whether they know that they know it or not, God’s eternity and infinite essence are known to all.\textsuperscript{234}

In order to be able to refer to these distinct ways of knowing x (knowing x without knowing x to fit the essential description of ‘x’ and knowing x while knowing that x fits that description), I have called former veiled knowledge and the unveiled knowledge. In unqualified form, knowledge of God’s infinite and eternal essence is inevitable for any knowing subject - yet unveiled knowledge of the same essence is manifestly not inevitable. Indeed, it is possible for me to be directly

\textsuperscript{233} Spinoza did not hold a container view of space, and so the last way of phrasing his view on the relation between extension and extended bodies is more accurate. See Bennett (1984, pp. 81-110), who has given the so-called “field metaphysic” reading of the relation between extension and what is extended its most rigorous presentation. For other, similar, accounts, see the bibliography in Valtteri Viljanen (2007, p. 397, n. 7).

\textsuperscript{234} This problematizes Spinoza’s characterization of the knowledge as “adequate and perfect”. If we know x adequately and perfectly, should we not thereby know what x is?
acquainted with someone or something without being able to describe that thing as it is essentially. It is, it transpires, likewise possible for me to be acquainted with an essence of God without thereby realizing that it is indeed an essence of God and as such eternal and infinite.

Knowledge of God is epistemically prior in that mere acquaintance with an attribute of God functions as a transcendental (in the Kantian sense) condition placed upon any form of knowledge of singular things. But knowledge of God as God is not such a condition, transcendental in the Kantian sense. Differently put, in order to know modes we must be familiar with the attribute of which they are modes. But this acquaintance does not require of us that we know that they are indeed attributes of God. Nonetheless such knowledge is epistemically prior to our predication of infinity of the modes.

In addition, unveiled knowledge of God is also, as I will discuss more in detail in the following chapter, normatively prioritized: it, and not veiled knowledge of the same object, is the human activity valued most highly in Spinoza’s system. On my reading, the epistemic ascension from knowledge of God tout court to knowledge of God as God is to be framed in an ethical and soteriological context.235 Let me presently draw the basic contours of what may be called Spinoza’s perspectival soteriology by the means of a comparison.

In the metaphor of the cave, Plato famously describes how we ascend from the sensible world of mutable objects to the intelligible world of forms. The intelligible world of forms is that which admits of knowledge in the proper sense (episteme). It is the permanence of the forms which make them qualify as solid objects of knowledge. By contrast, of that which is and is not - the changeable

235 It follows that I do not agree with commentators who argue that what I have called veiled knowledge of God is the highest good for Spinoza. See for instance Curley’s interpretation (1988, p. 125): “I should stress that when Spinoza speaks of the knowledge of God as the summum bonum, I take him to be understanding that phrase very broadly, not as limited to the kind of knowledge which would more conventionally be thought of as knowledge of God. Any kind of scientific understanding of any subject matter will count as knowledge of God (Sp24; 30). So for example, Freudian psychology, if it genuinely provided a scientific understanding of man, would be knowledge of God.”
objects of our senses - we can only have opinions (doxa), but never solid knowledge. Plato enjoin us to undertake the spiritual process that will open the eye of the intellect to the world of the forms not only because we thereby gain in epistemic status. The contemplation of forms is also ethically and aesthetically enjoined.

For Spinoza too, knowledge of an immutable object - God - is the highest good, and our sole beatitude.

But there is an important difference between Spinoza and Plato.

For Plato we have to abandon the object of opinion for the object of knowledge. These are numerically distinct objects. For Spinoza, that object in knowledge of which our blessedness consists is an object that we always already know: God’s nature. However, our knowledge of this nature is more often than not veiled: although we are acquainted with it, we do not recognize it for what it is. In order to come to know wholly that object that we must know in order to become blessed, we must not abandon the object that we sensually perceive or imagine. Instead, we must change our way of attending to it; we must regard it through a different lens and come to know it under a different aspect. The individual's journey towards beatitude consists in coming to know that with which one is inevitably acquainted as God. In the following chapter, I will discuss this process more in detail.

Conclusion.

In Chapter 6, I indicated how changing one’s perspective on infinity can be pivotal in construing the object of one’s passions as necessary and thereby also in weakening these passions. In this chapter I have motivated why, for Spinoza, it is possible to model one's knowledge of the modes’ infinity after that of the attributes in the first place. It is possible because, for Spinoza, God's infinity is first known and the modes’ infinity is intellectually cognizable by means of an analogy. Unlike in traditional accounts, this analogy proceeds from God’s nature to finite things. In other words, it is because we first know God’s infinity that we
are in position to predicate infinity analogously of his modes. But, it was objected, certainly God’s infinity is not known by all the way it should be, if it is to be epistemically primary in the required sense. In order to deal with this difficulty, I distinguished between veiled and unveiled knowledge of God. One realizes the infinity of any attribute of which one has an idea of a mode as soon as one has unveiled knowledge of God. For, if God is absolutely infinite he must be in possession of all attributes, and hence it suffices to understand that extension, for instance, could be conceived of as an attribute of God in order to consider it as such. If it is conceivably an attribute of God and God is absolutely infinite, it must be an attribute of God. But one need not realize this in order to have adequate, yet unveiled, knowledge of the attribute in question.

The fact that one comes to know the modes’ infinity only by analogy indicates an unexpected limit to Spinoza’s rationalism, if rationalism is equated with the claim that reality is entirely penetrable to reason. If reality is to be penetrable to reason it is often assumed that its basic structure can be mathematically described. For the epitome of reason consists in such abstract (mathematical, or at least logical) thinking. But for Spinoza, oddly, the infinity of the modes cannot be established by any formal procedure. As such, in abstraction from the infinity of the substance, the infinity of the modes cannot be known. Finite things such as ourselves (at least with respect to the property of infinity) thus occupy the epistemically inferior position that was traditionally reserved for God. Just as in the Thomist account, God’s goodness (say) could only be (imperfectly) known by relating it to creaturely goodness, so on Spinoza’s view the infinity of finite things can only be (adequately) known by relating it to divine infinity. Thus Spinoza tackles the puzzle of Chapter 6 - how the infinity of the modes can be known by conceptually modelling it after the infinity of the attributes - by inverting the analogy that was traditionally held to characterize predication across divine and non-divine contexts.
Chapter 8

Beyond Passivity and Activity: Spinoza on Love of God

Twixt Thee and me an “I am” is, o'ercrowding me:

Take, by Thine own “I am,” mine from between us

- Al Hallaj

Introduction.

In this chapter I treat Spinoza’s notion of the third kind of knowledge. The question I am interested in is why this kind of knowledge is affectively superior to all other forms of (human) mental activity. On the reading I advance, the third kind of knowledge is thus superior not because it is knowledge of something different but because it is knowledge as something different. By analyzing Spinoza’s concept of intellectual love of God I reach the conclusion that in the third kind of knowledge the subject knows herself as God (albeit God modified in a certain way). I argue that this aspect of intellectual love of God is of importance for Spinoza’s ethics for two reasons. First, it explains the already mentioned controversial superiority of the third kind of knowledge over knowledge of the second kind. Second, it helps us to discover how Spinoza, on my reading, proposes to square perfection monism - the view that all perfection is ultimately predicated only of God - with human perfectionism. More precisely, my thesis is that Spinoza accomplishes the reconciliation of these two apparently incompatible positions by having us renegotiate, through the third kind of knowledge, our concepts of activity and passivity. On my reading the “transition from passivity to activity” - often judged problematic in the scholarship236 - takes place exactly by the means of this reevaluation.

236 The most profound theory of activity in Spinoza’s metaphysics is probably Viljanen (2011). Yet, Viljanen studies dynamic essentialism as a Spinozist action theory solely from a metaphysical point of view and so neglects, as he himself admits, the problem of
The chapter is structured as follows. (1) I introduce the problem. (2.1) I present the link between knowledge and perfection. Having established that, on Spinoza’s view, perfection is activity and that to have adequate knowledge is to be active, it is necessary to explore the concept of adequacy. (2.2) I unpack the Spinozist notion of adequacy. Intellectual love of God necessarily accompanies the third kind of knowledge. (3) I analyze passages where Spinoza describes intellectual love of God in order to examine what these passages reveal about the third kind of knowledge. I suggest that the collapse of objective and subjective genitive in love of God reveals that in the third, but not in the second, kind of knowledge, God is the subject reflexively known. (4) I delineate some consequences of my reading for Spinoza’s philosophy of human perfection. On my interpretation, by allowing for human passivity to be converted into divine activity through the process of reflection, Spinoza is able to present an ideal of human perfection that is compatible with perfection monism. I conclude by briefly contrasting my reading of Spinoza with a contemporary account of human perfectionism (due to Thomas Hurka) and a reading of Spinoza in an “activist” spirit akin to Hurka (due to Matthias Kisner).

8.1. The problem.

For Spinoza, the mind’s perfection is greater to the extent that it acts, it acts whenever it is internally determined, and then it has adequate, clear and distinct ideas, as opposed to confused ones (see 2p29s).^{237} Indeed, a man free from

---

^{237} It is noteworthy that Spinoza in 2p29 treats confusion as the complement of adequacy and clarity and distinctness. Spinoza’s use of the phrase “clear and distinct” has not yet been thoroughly investigated, but it is remarkable that while Descartes (Regulae I-XII and Discours de la méthode, II) and Leibniz (Discours de métaphysique, article 24) both, for all their differences, considered clarity to be the complement of obscurity and distinctness the complement of confusion, Spinoza speaks only of confused ideas as what appears to be the complement of adequate (and hence clear and distinct ideas) as well. My understanding of Leibniz’s relation to Descartes is indebted to Le Roy (1993, pp. 246-7). Bem-
passions would, on Spinoza’s view, be lead only by reason, that is, he would act on nothing but adequate ideas (see 4p66s). It should be noted that as human beings are finite, it is impossible that they should never be affected by external objects in such a way that they form passions and inadequate ideas (cf. 4p4), and so any striving towards such an ideal must be asymptotic. Since passions are inadequate ideas (3p3), it transpires that Spinoza’s cognitive therapeutical program to (as far as possible) regiment the passions by the means of adequate ideas (surveyed in Chapter 6) is also an ontological program designed at gaining in perfection (and thus in reality: 2d6).

It is noteworthy that this ontological perfectionist program aimed at allowing one to (asymptotically) approach freedom does not only consist in the formation of adequate knowledge tout court, but in the formation of two different kinds of knowledge, one of which is described as being of far greater utility for relative freedom than the other. For it is not the case that all adequate ideas are equally powerful in the combat against passions. More specifically, Spinoza claims that knowledge of the third kind is superior to knowledge of the second kind in this regard. Before we can investigate why knowledge of the third kind is superior to knowledge of the second kind, it is necessary to briefly introduce what is meant by this distinction.

Spinoza makes the distinction between different kinds of cognition in TIE (see especially [19], C. 12-13), in Chapters 1 and 2 of Part 2 of his KV, as well as in the Ethics. Let me here focus on the latter text. In the Ethics, Spinoza first draws the distinction in 2p40s2, where he distinguishes between things known by the (i) imagination, that is, through the senses or by report, (ii) by reason (ratio) through “common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things” and (iii) by intuitive knowledge, which “proceeds from adequate ideas of the formal essences of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: formal] essences of things”. These are the first, second and third kind of

--
nett (2001, p. 74) has suggested that Descartes “erred in thinking he had a useful notion of “clear and distinct, although in no way adequate”.

238 For an analysis of the differences between the three texts, see Mignini (1990).
knowledge, respectively. All adequate ideas are either of the second or the third kind, and these ideas, and these ideas only, are necessarily true (cf. 2p41).

Since virtue is the same thing as power (4p8), and more specifically, the power to bring about those effects which follow from one’s essence (see 3p7; 4d8), it is to be expected that the virtue of the mind will consist in thinking adequate ideas. For the essence of the human mind consists solely in understanding (see 5p36c), and we understand things solely by the means of adequate ideas. Somewhat surprisingly, however, one’s virtue is not solely determined by the proportion of adequate ideas to inadequate ideas in one’s mind. Instead, one’s virtue is greater the more one knows things by the subset of adequate ideas belonging to the third kind of knowledge. In 5p27, Spinoza writes: “The greatest virtue of the mind is to know God (4p28) or to understand things by the third kind of knowledge”. In 5p36c, Spinoza comments on this superiority of the third kind of knowledge, that is, its conductivity to greater perfection, in these words:

I thought this worth the trouble of noting here, in order to show by this example how much the 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 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 when this is inferred from the very essence of a singular thing which we say depends on God [Emphases added].

The issue of what accounts for the difference between the second and the third kind of knowledge is hotly debated in the literature. Many different accounts have been proposed. On a widespread reading, the two kinds of knowledge are to be distinguished on the basis of a difference in their objects proper: while knowledge of the second kind intends common notions and properties, knowledge of the third kind intends (formal) essences.239 By contrast, some interpreters propose that the

---

third kind of knowledge presents the same content differently. While I favour the second interpretation, I will not directly address the issue of whether there are objects proper to each kind of cognition in this chapter. Instead, I will present an alternative reading where the superiority of the third kind of knowledge is accounted for by the knowing subject’s knowing herself differently. Such a reading is compatible both with the theory of there being objects proper to each kind of cognition and with the negation of this theory. If my reading is right, however, no difference in the object of knowledge need be appealed to in order to explain the superiority of the third kind of knowledge.

But if the knowing subject knows herself differently in the third kind of knowledge, is she not hereby also knowing a different object? Not necessarily. For Spinoza, all true (and, as I pointed out in Chapter 3, conscious) ideas are accompanied by indubitable knowledge of oneself having true ideas (2p43). Hence, for any true idea $x$, to know $x$ is to know that I know $x$. The view I am defending is, more precisely, that in the third kind of knowledge it is not only the case that I know $x$ and hence know that I know $x$, I know and experience in addition that the I to which the reflexive knowledge refers, is ultimately God’s, and that this, in turn, accounts for the superiority of this knowledge. It is important to realize that the I which accompanies the third kind of knowledge does not refer to an I different from the I which accompanies all my true knowledge. This is so since the human mind is always part of God’s infinite intellect (2p11c), so in coming to know that my mind as embedded in God’s intellect I do not change the I I identify with, I merely come to cognize it under a different guise. More clearly, “I know $x$” and “I, as God, know $x$” do not necessarily differ in the information they convey about $x$. Instead, they differ in that the first-person perspective is different in each case.

---

240 See for instance, Carr (1978), Sandler (2005); Primus (2017). On Primus’ view, I take it, the object of scientia intuitiva is the same as the object of reason, but as additionally furnished with formal reality.

241 Perhaps one could express the view I am defending by saying that in the third kind of knowledge the true idea comes to be known under a different character. Kaplan (1989) introduces character as a way of squaring beliefs in prima facie incompatible propositions. (Kaplan speaks of believing a proposition, not an idea, under different characters. Since I am not sure that for Spinoza all ideas are propositional, I would not attribute that view to him off-handedly.) But the most salient difference between contemporary ac-
On my reading, coming to know things adequately in the second kind of knowledge is already to come to know them as God knows them, but only in coming to know them as God knows them as God, can one reach the pinnacle of human perfection.242 (As we have seen, Spinoza explicitly specifies that to know things by the third kind of knowledge is to acquire the “greatest human perfection” [5p27d].) Shortly, I will defend this thesis. But let me first comment more in detail on the link between knowledge and perfection.

8.2. Knowledge.

8.2.1. Knowledge, perfection, activity.

On Spinoza’s view, perfection co-varies with the possession of (adequate) knowledge. This is because perfection and activity are the same (see 5p40), and knowledge or understanding by the means of adequate ideas, is the activity of the mind (3p1). Let me first unpack the equivalence of perfection and activity by showing how it follows from two other equivalencies.

242 In general, I thus agree with Melamed (2013b) about the intimate link between God’s knowledge and the third kind of knowledge possessed by humans. It may also be noted that Melamed also calls our attention to Spinoza’s statements in CM II 7. From this it follows, according to Melamed (2013b, p. 102) that God does not have knowledge of universals. Melamed’s theory that second knowledge is knowledge of universals is consistent with how it is described, and nonetheless ideas of universals are confused and inadequate (2p40s1), while knowledge of the second kind is supposedly adequate. Hence, unless we have to admit an inconsistency, knowledge of the second kind cannot be knowledge of universals as these are commonly understood, even though Spinoza uses the word ‘universal’ to describe it. How to square knowledge of the second kind can be of “common notions and properties” without being of universals is a serious problem: see Rice (1984) for a discussion - I do not claim that I present the solution to this difficult problem here.
The first equivalence obtains between perfection and being or reality (for the equivalence of *esse* and *realitas* see 1p9). It is rooted in Spinoza’s transcendental understanding of being discussed in Part 1 of this thesis. Being is, for Spinoza, everywhere characterized by a co-extensional yet intensionally different property, namely perfection (see 2d6). Moreover, reality or being co-varies with power or causal efficacy. There is thus nothing - no being -, which does not cause some effect (see 1p36).

The second equivalence obtains between activity and causal efficacy. This equivalence requires explanation. If a hostage is forced at gunpoint to read aloud a script prepared by his kidnappers, the hostage is the cause of the script being read aloud. But is the declamation of the script a manifestation of his own activity? In one sense, yes. But if activity is to be understood along the lines of adequate causation, this cannot be so. Spinoza defines adequate causation, and its complement, in 3d1 and 3d2. When the effect can be “clearly and distinctly perceived” through the cause, it is adequate; if not, it is inadequate. The declamation of the script cannot be adequately understood through the hostage: in order to understand the content of the script (which, I should mention, the kidnappers have composed) as well as its declamation, reference to the kidnappers must also be made. Interpreters of Spinoza must choose: is perfection/activity identical with causal production *tout court* or identical with the production of those effects of which the thing in question is the adequate cause? It is the thinking of adequate ideas which is the activity of the mind - and not the thinking of ideas *tout court*. This indicates that activity is, plausibly, adequate causation, i.e., the causation of those effects which can be conceived or understood through the causal agent bringing them about. This naturally raises the exegetical question whether Spinoza’s picture allows for things such as finite modes to ever be adequate causes. Does not all causation among finite things propagate infinitely (as per 1p28)?243 I cannot enter this discussion directly here. However, by analyzing Spinoza’s notion of love of God I hope to be able to shed new light on the kind of mental activity that Spinoza, on my reading, considers to be the

---

243 This question has been raised previously: see Chapter 6, section 2. For a more complete bibliography collating responses to the issue, see Sangiacomo and Nachtomy (2018, p. 102. n. 1).
supreme one available to humans. It is, to be precise, the activity which consists in acknowledging that one’s “own” activity belongs to God.

For Spinoza, any reflexive judgment is a sign of an increase in power. In 3p53d Spinoza makes the point that when a mind has reached such a degree of power of thinking that it can “consider itself [se ipsam contemplari]”, this signifies that it has undergone a parallel transition toward greater bodily power of action as well. A mind’s reflection upon its own power of thinking is accompanied by joy since to reach a state where one is able to self-reflect in this way signifies that one has undergone a transition to greater perfection, and joy is defined as such as a transition (see Def.of.Aff.II).^244

Since true ideas are self-evidentially true in the sense that one cannot consciously have a true idea and be ignorant of its truth, consciously having a true idea necessarily implies a certain measure of reflexivity: the reflexivity that is involved in always being able to move from “x is true” to “I know that x is true”. And, since all possession of true ideas signifies an increase in one’s power of acting, so does all reflexivity. According to Spinoza’s epistemology, a mind invariably knows when it (consciously) possesses a true idea (2p43), and since adequacy is what, in abstraction from the object of any idea, indicates its truth (2d4), all true ideas are also adequate. If the activity of knowledge is the perfection of the mind,

^244 The view that self-awareness is essentially joyful can easily be called into question. Does not anxiety and similar moods indicate that to be aware of oneself can be painful and sometimes unbearable? In order to respond to this obvious objection, it is necessary to bring in some of Spinoza’s definitional machinery. 3p53 reads: “When the mind considers itself and its power of acting, it rejoices…” What is the mind’s self, what is its power of acting and how are they linked? One way of reading the passage, which has the benefit of evading the difficult question of how they are linked, is to think of the mind as being such that when it considers itself it cannot but consider its power of acting. This would be the case if a mind in truly considering itself considered its essence. When the mind truly considers or contemplates its essence, it considers only its (essential) activity and none of the passivity the body undergoes as a consequence of being in the world. For, as I mentioned in the Chapter 5, section 3, essences are “affirmative”. For Spinoza, sadness detracts from perfection or being (see his Gen.Def.Aff). But because essences are affirmative, no such detraction from perfection or being can be contained in the essence of a thing. For that reason, the consideration of one’s essential self can never inspire sadness. Although this is not a full-fledged defence of Spinoza’s theory that self-awareness is intrinsically a matter of joy, it at least gestures towards a solution.

246
then *self-reflexivity too is an infallible indicator of perfection*. For the former entails the latter.

Knowledge is considered to obtain once one possesses adequate ideas. Given the central position of truth and adequacy - the evidence of truth which an idea carries on its sleeve - for perfection, it is necessary to present these concepts in some more detail.

8.2.2. Truth and adequacy.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, an idea is true when it corresponds with its object (*ideatum*: 1a6; see further 1p30d for the minimum requirement of correspondence). But since truth is self-evidential, it is not necessary to examine reality in order to judge an idea true. It is sufficient to examine the idea itself. An idea is evidentially true even in abstraction from its object when it is adequate: that is, when it possesses all the “intrinsic denominations” of a true idea (2d4). Spinoza specifies that by “intrinsic denominations” he means those properties that mark a true idea apart from its correspondence with its object (2d4exp).245

But what is adequacy? Several commentators have pointed out that for Spinoza, adequacy is a context-sensitive or mind-relative notion.246 An idea is adequate with respect to a mind. All ideas are true in God’s intellect (2p32) and consequently also adequate there. Ideas adequate in a human mind - whether these are known by the second or the third kind of knowledge - are also adequate in God’s intellect.

More precisely, ideas are adequate in a human mind H when the idea of x is in God’s intellect G insofar as (*quatenus ut*) he is affected by the idea of H alone,

245 What kind of properties are these “intrinsic denominations” on the basis of which we can judge truth to obtain even without checking with reality? On a plausible reading articulated by Schmid, these are “denominations” that fit that idea into a greater body of knowledge (2008, p. 216). Here, I will not deal with this “phenomenal” question of what constitutes adequacy - that is, with the question of why adequate ideas appear as such to us - but rather with the metaphysical ground of adequacy.

and otherwise it is inadequate in H. If x is not adequate in G insofar as he is affected by the idea of H alone, then the idea of H does not involve adequate knowledge of x. This reasoning is explicitly stated in 2p11c, and at play in for instance 2p25d and 2p28d, where Spinoza uses these formulas to explain why our sensual knowledge of external bodies and our own body parts is inadequate in us. But can he really maintain such a view? Even when one puts aside the pressing question of plausibility, a question of internal consistency remains.

Can God be affected by the idea of the human mind alone? Is it possible for anyone to entertain a thought of the human mind without thinking about anything else? This could perhaps be possible if the human mind was construed as something independently existing (historically this would be as a substantial form, say, or a soul). But Spinoza appears to deny himself this option.

For Spinoza, the human mind is the idea of its body (2p13) and the body is a singular thing. Being a singular thing, it is tributary to infinite arrays of finite causes (2p9) none of which constitute the essence of the body. Moreover, the body is a composite thing, whose parts are continuously affected, composed and decomposed by other bodies (see Part 2, Postulates I, III, IV). For that reason, God exists as the human body neither by being himself qua God nor even by simply being the body as such, but by being influenced by the entire flux of external bodies which affect the body. Likewise, God exists as the human mind by forming an idea of a body undergoing influences from without: “this idea [of the human mind] will be in God insofar as he is considered to be affected by the ideas of great many singular things [sc. apart from the mind itself]” (2p19d). This is an interesting claim. The claim is, to be precise, that the human mind exists not in virtue of God’s intellect containing the idea of it tout court, but by him thinking of it as influenced from without, victimized by myriad external forces. God’s self-passivation at the hands of entities arising through innumerable other divine self-passivations is what makes the body exist. The mind, being the idea of the body, inevitably references this passivity vis-à-vis the world.

It is indeed Spinoza’s professed view that the human mind does not possess adequate knowledge of its body (2p19) and accordingly not of itself, either (but
only inadequate knowledge of the body’s many affections: 2p23; 2p28). But if there is no such thing as a thought of the human body alone, of the human body shielded from external influences, then it appears that no human mind can ever entertain an adequate idea.

Let me summarize the difficulty. Spinoza’s argumentative moves in 2p25d and 2p28d indicate that exactly those ideas are adequate in a human mind H that follow from H independently of how its body is produced (and “reduced”) by external forces. But given Spinoza’s account of how the body is produced, it seems that no ideas can follow from the human mind alone. Yet we cannot evince mental perfection unless there is a way for some ideas to so follow.

Fortunately for the prospect of human perfection in Spinozism, there is a way for ideas to so follow. The reason why ideas can so follow is that, in addition to believing in the body as existing in virtue of innumerable external factors, Spinoza also espouses a doctrine of affirmative essences. I briefly covered the Spinozist notion of essence in Chapter 5, section 3. As we saw in that section, essences are “affirmative” in the sense that no thing can undergo any form of passivity - any detraction from being - as a consequence of its essence. Why is this so? Previously, I mentioned the admirably fast answer to this question provided by Martin Lin. On Lin’s reading, a self-negating essence is a contradiction in terms. But it is worth to linger for a while on the prima facie inconsistency that arises from Spinoza’s postulation that essences be eternal.

Essences - even the essences of finite things - are eternal (see 1p17s, where Spinoza speaks of the essence of man as an “eternal truth”). Eternity is, as previously stated, the existence-cum-essence of that whose existence and essence are one (1d8; cf. 1p20). But the essence of a human being does not involve existence (see, for example, 1p8s2). So, by definition, it appears it cannot be eternal. How then can finite essences nonetheless be eternal?
Spinoza’s doctrine of the eternity of an aspect of the human mind is notoriously difficult and circles around the crucial proposition of 5p23. I cannot here provide a complete interpretation of that doctrine.247 But judging from 5p23d, Spinoza’s reasoning is that to the extent that there is in God an idea of the human mind insofar as it is unimpeded by external forces - what I take to be the essence of the human mind - that essence must also have formal being. This follows from the parallelism Spinoza espouses in 2p7 and its scholium. In terms of the two sole attributes that Spinoza claims that human beings have access to, that doctrine is essentially the claim that things cannot have objective being in God’s intellect without also having formal being in God’s attributes. This means that God cannot entertain an idea of anything without that thing also having being in addition to the being it enjoys as an idea.

The idea of the human mind’s essence does not owe its explanation to any external forces. The being of that idea - the essence of the human mind - is entirely grounded in the fact that God entertains it as an object of one of his ideas. But, as Spinoza indicates in 5p23d, whatever exists objectively by being intended by God’s intellect also exists formally in an attribute of God. Spinoza can then infer that essence’s eternity from the fact that if something has being (“formally”) in an attribute of God, it is eternal. But why should things be eternal merely because they have their being in God’s attributes? Recall that things are eternal to the extent that they “follow directly” from the absolute nature of God’s attributes (1p20-1p21). If the essence of the human mind has its ground solely in one of God’s attributes, it appears that it should follow directly from its “absolute nature”, and so be eternal.

Although this may not be a full resolution of the puzzle of how finite things can aspire to eternity within the confines of Spinoza’s system, I hope that the following, at least, has been established. In order for ideas to follow from the human mind alone, they must follow from the eternal essence of that mind. We can thus restate the previously given account of adequacy in these words: an idea \( x \) is adequate in a human intellect \( H \) when \( x \) is in the divine intellect \( G \) because \( G \)

247 For a convincing account, see Don Garrett (2009).
is affected by the (idea of) the eternal essence of H, and otherwise it is inadequate. 248

Which ideas follow in this way? In this chapter, I will suggest that one such idea is the idea that God entertains all of one’s adequate ideas - in terms of thought, or, in purely ontological terms, that God is all one is, or again, in “transcendental” terms, that God possesses the very perfections one possesses through one’s possession of them. When accompanied by the reflexive awareness that one’s idea is thought by God (or that one’s being is God’s) and that one hence thinks (or is) only as God, I will argue, such ideas constitute the third kind of knowledge.

That perfection is positively proportional to the amount of adequate ideas we possess is easily inferred from the two equivalencies between the mind’s activity and understanding, on the one hand, and (causal) activity and perfection, on the other. But if knowledge of the second as well as the third kind are both adequate, then the question arises what accounts for their difference in force.

I would like to propose that the difference in force can be explained by a difference in the subject reflexively involved in the two kinds of knowledge. Only in the third kind of knowledge, or so I suggest, does one reflexively acknowledge or experience that God thinks one’s ideas. But why should the third kind of knowledge be different in terms of the subject it reflexively intends?

Before I demonstrate this by analyzing the notion of love of God, I would like to indicate that my reading is at least compatible with another, rarely noted, feature of scientia intuitiva. This feature consists in how this knowledge is related to the notion just discussed - the eternal essence of the mind. Since we have just treated the eternal mind, it is worth exploring that feature here.

---

248 This account of adequacy at least goes some way towards explaining why adequacy is the self-evidence of truth. If an idea x is in G because of what H is essentially and so eternally, then this does seem to imply that the resources to explain x are always available to the mind H for whom x is adequate. I do not claim I respond to this phenomenological question in this chapter.
The intellect is for Spinoza the deposit of adequate ideas, and this part of the mind is eternal (5p40c). Ideas known by the second and the third kind of knowledge, respectively, are all adequate, and so they should be equally eternal. Therefore, it is interesting to note that not only do the second and the third kind of knowledge differ in terms of their force, their respective eternity is also differently described.

Spinoza says of reason (the “faculty” for conceiving ideas by the second kind of knowledge, cf. 2p40s), that it is in its nature to conceive things under a certain species of eternity (2p44c). 5p24 supplies an explanation concerning what it means to conceive things under a species of eternity: it appears it means not being preoccupied with the actual existence of things so much as with their eternal essences.\(^{249}\) What is known by reason is eternal. As is familiar to readers of Spinoza, what is known by intuitive science is eternal as well (5p33; 5p36).

Interestingly, however, the eternity characterizing the third kind of knowledge is also given a unique description: “The third kind of knowledge “depends on the mind, as on a formal cause, *insofar as* the mind itself is eternal” (Emphasis added: 5p31). It is important to note that the second kind of knowledge is not described in this way. But what does it mean for a piece of knowledge to depend upon a mind, insofar as it is eternal, as on a formal cause? It must first of all be noted, that in the demonstration of 5p31, Spinoza glosses “formal cause” as “adequate cause”. By calling the eternal mind the formal cause of some knowledge, Spinoza means that that knowledge can be “clearly and distinctly perceived” through the eternal mind alone (cf. 3d1).

---

\(^{249}\) This is problematic, since, in 2p40s, knowledge by reason is said to consist in knowledge of common properties. But if knowledge by reason is of things under a species of eternity and knowledge of things under a species of eternity is knowledge of essences, then knowledge by reason should be knowledge of essences and not knowledge of common properties. This seems to indicate that knowledge of these two objects of knowledge (common properties versus essences) that one may suppose could distinguish the two kinds of adequate knowledge (the second and the third, respectively) is in some way, at least, overlapping. And this, in turn, may speak against distinguishing between knowledge of the second and third kinds in terms of their targeting different objects of knowledge.
The question of how this can be a distinctive feature of the third kind of knowledge seems at first irresolvable. This is because all (adequate) knowledge depends upon the eternal mind as on an adequate cause. Consider the way we just defined adequacy: an idea \( x \) is adequate in a human intellect \( H \) when \( x \) is in the divine intellect \( G \) because \( G \) is affected only by the (idea of) the eternal essence of \( H \), and otherwise it is inadequate. This applies to all adequate ideas, whether they belong to the second or the third kind of knowledge. For any adequate idea, it depends on the eternal mind as on an adequate cause because we can know why that idea is in God’s intellect simply by knowing the eternal mind. Is Spinoza’s characterization of the third kind of knowledge in this passage too generic? Why would he characterize all adequate knowledge in a passage specifically devoted to knowledge of the third kind?

One way of dealing with this question is by paying closer attention to the locution “insofar as the mind itself is eternal [\textit{quatenus mens ipsa aeterna est}]” (5p31: G. II/229). All knowledge depends on the eternal mind as on an adequate cause. But all knowledge does not depend on the eternal mind, \textit{insofar as it is eternal}, as on an adequate cause. Simply put, my suggestion is that we can have adequate knowledge without realizing or experiencing the eternity of the mind. In order to know by the third kind of knowledge, by contrast, one must know that one’s mind is eternal. In this sense, this knowledge depends on the mind \textit{insofar as it is eternal}, or, modified after the manner I suggest, \textit{insofar as it is known to be eternal}. To justify my modification, it may be noted that “insofar as” shifts not what an expression refers to, but the guise under which the thing is known or conceived. For example, God insofar as he is extended can be the cause of an extended thing, but not God insofar as he is thinking - and this in spite of the numerical identity between the thinking and extended substance. When I understand “insofar as it is eternal” as meaning “insofar as it is conceived or known to be eternal” I follow the way Spinoza often uses the locution.

This reading meets the minimum requirement of being compatible with the way Spinoza qualifies the third kind of knowledge in 2p40s2. In that scholium, he says that the third kind of knowledge “proceeds from adequate ideas of the formal essences of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS:
formal] essences of things”. Knowledge of the “formal essence of a certain attributes of God” is knowledge of those features of God which explain why all conceivable things have formal being - viz. his infinity (see Chapter 5, section 1). Knowledge of the “(formal) essence of a thing” is, in the most salient case, knowledge of my mind’s being inscribed in God’s attribute. But by so knowing one’s own mind, one comes to regard oneself differently. God’s essence is the same as his causal activity (1p34). Attributes are ways God is and thus ways in which he is causally active. So, to know that one has being in some attribute of God is to know that one is an instance of God’s causal activity as it is conceived under that attribute. So, to know that one’s mind is in God’s attribute of thought is simply to know that God is the one thinking one’s thoughts.

If the third kind of knowledge is essentially knowledge as God and, by Spinoza’s reflexivity principle, knowledge of the fact that one has such knowledge as God, then Spinoza’s claim that it depends on the eternal mind as on its adequate cause becomes easier to grasp. In saying that the third kind of knowledge depends on the mind as on an adequate cause insofar as the mind is eternal Spinoza implies (or so I suggest) that what distinguishes the third kind of knowledge is that the mind insofar as it knows itself to have being only in God is the self-conscious subject of that knowledge. In the second as well as in the third kind of knowledge, the object is known as it is eternally, but in the third kind of knowledge the subject knows herself to be eternal too.

This is not to be taken as a compelling argument - I do not pretend that Spinoza can be convicted for conflating human and divine subjectivity on the evidence presented above. Above, I presented only a suggestion of how the third kind of knowledge may be said to depend on the mind “insofar as it is eternal” - but that claim is to be further substantiated by interpretation of other passages. In what follows, I present a reading of the collapse of objective and subjective genitive in love of God to substantiate my case.
8.3. Love of God.

The question posed at the onset of this chapter was what explains the difference in force over affects between knowledge of the second and the third kind. Intellectual love of God is what explains the superior force over affects characterizing the third, but not the second kind of knowledge. For, from the third kind of knowledge, intellectual love of God “necessarily arises” (5p32c). But what, in turn, explains that this love is so strong, and necessarily stronger than any human affect? The two kinds of knowledge, I suggest, are different with their respect to power over affects because they are consciously entertained by subjects reflexively known under different guises. I will explain that statement more in detail by exploring what Spinoza’s notion of love of God reveals.

Let me first note, once more, that, strictly speaking, love of God is not an affect (see Chapter 3, section 2.1). Love is defined as joy accompanied by the idea of an external cause (Gen.Def.Aff.VI), and joy is defined as a transition to greater perfection (Gen.Def.Aff.II). Since the third kind of knowledge, and the love that necessarily accompanies it, are supposed to be constant, intellectual love of God cannot be accurately described only in terms of a transition to greater perfection. Spinoza cautions the reader who would take him at his words in the following way:

> Although this [intellectual] love toward God has had no beginning [by 5p33] it still has all the perfections of Love, just as if it had come to be (as we feigned in 5p32c). There is no difference here, except that the Mind has had eternally the same perfection which, in our fiction, now came to it, and that it is accompanied by the idea of God as an eternal cause. 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 (5p33s: Emphasis added).

---

250 See also KV, 2 II [3].
251 This has not always been appreciated in the secondary literature. See for instance Frankena (1977). According to Frankena, divine self-love is “inconsistent” with 5p35, and Frankena argues, on this basis, that God must be subject to affects (p. 40).
Intellectual love of God is like love in that it is perfection accompanied by the idea of a cause (God), but it is unlike any affect (including love) in that it does not signify a fluctuation in one’s perfection, but rather the perfection with which one is already endowed. For this reason, intellectual love of God can be attributed to God, in spite of the fact that God is not subject to affects. Not only does God love himself with intellectual love, any finite mind’s love of God is part of the infinite intellectual love which God has for himself (5p36). (It should be added that although love of God is not an affect proper since it does not consist in a transition toward a greater or lesser perfection, there is a transition toward the perfection involved in coming to know that one eternally loves God in this way. Such instances of coming to know perfection one inevitably has, I have called instances of speculative perfection.)

Spinoza makes a point concerning the conditions under which “modes of thinking” can exist in 2a3. Here, he states that “there are no modes of thinking, such as love […], unless there is in the same Individual the idea of the thing loved. But there can be an idea even though there is no other mode of thinking.” For example, I can entertain the thought of a triangle and I can entertain the affect of love for that triangle. But while I can entertain the thought of a triangle without being emotionally attached to it in anyway (unless I suffer from some severe paraphilia), I cannot love the triangle unless I entertain the idea of the triangle. The intentionality of love is thus determined by the idea that the love in question accompanies. Although love of God may not be an affect proper, it is clearly a mode of thinking. So, what love is directed at in love of God is dictated by the

---

252 It is worth pointing out that Spinoza’s attribution of intellectual love of God to God is not to be confused with the Christian tradition of a God who is love (1 John 4:7-21). In the theological tradition surveyed in Chapter 7, the dogma of divine simplicity demanded that there be no difference between God’s essence and his love. For Spinoza, by contrast, God loves himself with infinite intellectual love because his nature enjoys infinite perfection and because there is necessarily in God’s intellect an idea of this nature (see 5p35, which I here summarize). If God were identical with his love for himself, he would not enjoy infinite perfection. Love, being a mode of thought, could not be absolutely infinite (i.e. possess infinite attributes each of which is infinite), since it is attribute-specific. God’s infinite intellectual love of himself is as it were a mere side-effect of his nature being what it is. God would not love himself if he were not infinitely greater than his love for himself. (It may be added that God’s love of himself appears to be entirely incompatible with the naturalistic reading of Spinoza proposed by Nadler (2008).)
idea known by the third kind of knowledge which love of God accompanies. It is of crucial importance for the reading I advance that the peculiar intentional structure of love of God reveals something about the intentional structure of any idea known by the third kind of knowledge. Why the fuzz? Isn’t love of God simply directed at God? Interestingly, love of God is not simply so directed.

To see the that the structure of ideas known by the third kind of knowledge is reflexive in a peculiar way, consider that Spinoza in demonstrating 5p36, writes: “Love of God is an action by which the mind contemplates itself” (Emphasis added). In love, what is contemplated is what is loved, and so it is to be expected that the mind that loves God would contemplate God and not itself. The fact that in intellectual love of God, any mind contemplates itself can only mean, I submit, that any mind contemplates itself as God. But what does that mean?

One could think of various senses in which “I, as x” could operate. In a legal context, “I, as a judge” may have the authority to pass a legally binding sentence on you, something which “I, as a layperson” do not. Thus understood, the formula “I, as x” can specify which societal role the subject in question is undertaking at that moment. However, whatever my societal role, it is conferred upon me from without and extrinsic to my nature. Even for Spinoza, who would (arguably) reject any modal contingency, you could not infer someone’s career from his essence; some account need to be taken of factors of existence not included in the definition of the individual in question in order to see why he ended up a grinder of lenses (for example). By contrast, by knowing as God I don’t assume a role that could have been any different. When I come to know x as God, I come to know that I know x in the only way I could ever have known x: as God. Yet, only in the third kind of knowledge, or so I suggest, is this experienced.

Consider the following analogy: let us postulate that corporeality is (as it would seem) of the human essence. Having falsely believed myself to be a brain in a vat throughout my life, I for some reason suddenly change perspective on myself. I

---

253 Lacan’s famous definition of a fool as a king who thinks he is king captures the absurdity of a subject’s believing that his societal role is essential to him.
could now, for the first time, say that “I, as an embodied being” desire to touch the body of another person. My perspective on myself has shifted and come to encompass an essential, but hitherto overlooked, dimension of myself: my corporeality. Something akin, I suggest, is involved in the third kind of knowledge. On my reading, through the third kind of knowledge one knows one’s intellect to be fused with God’s. It is for this reason that the third kind of knowledge allows for one’s intellectual activities to gain in force, and consequently supremely capable of quenching passions.

But exactly how is this increase in forcefulness to be understood? As I emphasized in Chapter 6, passive affects are quenched by affective means only. One’s emotional life is impenetrable to reason as such. For true ideas cannot affectively outmaneuver false ones simply in virtue of being true - they need also be accompanied by affects stronger than the ones they are to outmaneuver (4p7; cf. 4p14: in the latter proposition, however, Spinoza speaks specifically about the powerlessness of “true knowledge of good and evil” insofar as it is true).

Passions (or passive affects) are passive because they are inextricably tied to inadequate ideas (3p3). On Spinoza’s view, inadequacy is passive in a literal sense. For it arises from a literal passivity of the mind vis-à-vis the world, where the mind is tributary to external forces. (In 3p3s, Spinoza mentions that the mind and other individual things - meaning bodies - are passive in the very same sense.)

254 I thank Peter Myrdal for valuable discussion on this topic and for pointing out to me the following parallel in Descartes. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes writes: “Et aussi, de ce qu’entre ces diverses perceptions des sens, les unes me sont agréables, et les autres désagréables, je puis tirer une conséquence tout à fait certaine, que mon corps (ou plutôt moi-même tout entier, en tant que je suis composé du corps et de l’âme: [meum corpus, sive potius me totum, quatenus et corpore & mente sum compositus]) peut recevoir diverses commodités ou incommodes des autres corps qui l'environnent” (AT, 65). By employing the phrase “my whole self, insofar as I am composed of the body and the soul”, Descartes again deepens a first-person perspective which methodic doubt has provisorily emasculated. In the case of Descartes, the human being qua a soul-body composite can refer to itself either under the guise of the soul alone or under the guise of the soul-body complex. For Spinoza, a mind necessarily embedded in God’s intellect, can refer to itself either as an autonomous agent, or, more truthfully, as necessarily embedded in God.
To know things by the third kind of knowledge and thus to love God is the
summit of human perfection. But perfection is coextensive with activity. So that
love of God is the most perfect state entails (and is entailed by) its being the most
active one. The kind of outmaneuvering of affects by other affects that the third
kind of knowledge makes possible is thus the outmaneuvering of relatively
weaker passive affects by relatively stronger active modes of thought. In what
follows, I will refer to the passivity or activity of an affect as its quality. (As
already noted, strictly speaking, love of God is not an affect. However, if the idea
of God as a cause which accompanies it is adequate, this mode of thinking can
still accurately be called active. For that reason, it can be treated in the same way
as other affects for the purpose of discussing the qualities of these modes of
thinking.)

To state that the third kind of knowledge is superior to that of the second kind on
my interpretation amounts to stating both that human knowledge which somehow
reflexively encompasses God is stronger than any knowledge which fails to so
encompass God and that it is more active. How come the third kind of knowledge
is always superiorly active? A clue to this question is present in the important
proposition 5p18, and more precisely, in its scholium. Because of the crucial
importance of 5p18 for my interpretation, I will here cite its demonstration,
corollary and scholium.

Dem.: The idea of God which is in us is adequate and perfect (by
2p46, 2p45). So insofar as we consider God, we act (by 3p3).
Consequently (by 3p59), there can be no Sadness accompanied by
the idea of God, i.e. (by Def. Aff. VII), no one can hate God, q.e.d.
Cor.: Love toward God cannot be turned into hate. Schol.: But, it
can be objected, while we understand God to be the cause of all
things, we thereby consider God to be the cause of Sadness. To this
I reply that insofar as we understand the causes of Sadness, it
ceases (by 3p3) to be a passion, i.e. (by 3p59), to that extent it
ceases to be a Sadness. And so, insofar as we understand God to be
the cause of Sadness, we rejoice (Emphasis added).

In 5p18s the quality of sadness is said to change when it is seen to be caused by
God: sadness then becomes a matter of rejoicing. In this passage, the quality of an
affect changes when its causal origin is considered differently.
Clearly a perspectival shift on the object of an emotion can transform the emotion in question. Consider, for example, the literary *topos* where a lover is grateful for being showered with stones as long as these are thrown by the beloved. It is easy to imagine a (romantic) lover wounded by a stone, whose initial infuriation is transformed into gratitude when he realizes that it is his beloved who has thrown the stone. No one would presumably want to take issue with this kind of affective alchemy. The problem arises when one assumes that for Spinoza the quality of an affect always reports accurately on its causal origin. That an affect was passive would then mean for it to have been caused in a certain way. No way of considering it can then retroactively cause it to have been caused in some other way.255

Yet, in the case we are considering, the origin of sadness was *mistakenly* thought to be something other than God. But, within the confines of Spinoza’s system, that is manifestly false - as per 1p15, everything that is, is within God and immanently caused by God. When we understand our sadness to be caused by God, this does not mean that the causal origin of the affect itself changes. It is our perspective on the affect that changes. But how can a shift in perspective change the quality of the affect in the question?

The reading I propose can help resolve this puzzle. If, through the third kind of knowledge, the identity of one’s mind with (a part of) God’s intellect is experienced, then the realization that the sadness was caused by God does indeed change the quality of the affect. Prior to the third kind of knowledge, the affect was caused by something that I was not. It was thus a passion. After the realization of the third kind of knowledge, the affect was caused by something that is me. In this way, it becomes active.

Against this suggestion, the most natural objection is that finite things are not God. God has several properties - infinity, for example - that finite things clearly lack. In response to this objection, it must be noted that Spinoza often speaks of

---

255 This problem is raised by for example Bennett (1984, pp 335-7).
God conceived under different guises - God insofar as (quatenus ut) he is indeed certain things - some of which are clearly finite.

If perfection monism is true, then all being/perfection is to be predicated of God. By contrast, all being/perfection is not predicated of me. It follows that whatever being I have, it is to be predicated of God, but the converse clearly does not hold: whatever being God has is not predicated of me. Instead I am merely a modification of God: God insofar as he is modified as me. But how are we to understand the relation between God and his modes? If there is no way for things to be unless their being is predicated of God, is tempting to say that God is them. But since God’s being is not predicated of them tout court, but only his being insofar as he is modified as them, the relation is not symmetrical. Someone may want to raise the objection that if this relation is not symmetrical, then surely the ‘is’ in ‘God is me’ cannot express identity at all. For I am not God tout court. Yet, identity is the paradigmatic equivalence relation and as such symmetrical.256 I grant that we probably ought to opt for a relation different from standard identity to formulate the relation whereby God is qua each one of his modes. For no mode is identical with God tout court. In order to stringently suggest a better candidate, however, one would have to present a full formalization of the various relations resembling identity in which substance, attributes and modes stand to each other,

256 However, given that Spinoza holds that there are different ways or aspects of being, it is not apparent that all kinds of identity relations that are needed to model his system are symmetrical. Bledin and Melamed (2019) distinguish between three genuine identity relations in Spinozism, only two of which are symmetrical. There is, on their view, first standard identity, an equivalence relation. Second, there is the cross-attribute identity of things as conceived under different attributes. Third, however, there is what they call the “projective identity of a multifaceted being” with that being as conceived under each of its attributes (its “facets”). The latter relation is not symmetrical, and the absence of symmetry holds for the same reason that the absence of symmetry holds in the case discussed here: namely, that there is simply more to God than his being under any specific attribute or as any specific mode. Of course, there is a difference between the projective identity, on the one hand, and the identity between God (insofar as he is me) and me, on the other: whereas there is, on one interpretation at least, nothing to the substance over and above all of its attributes with which he is “projectively” identical, there is arguably something to God over and above all of his modes, with which he is identical, insofar as he is them. I am thus not claiming that these two non-symmetrical “identities” are the same relation, merely pointing at how Spinoza’s metaphysics can allow for more complex relations than the simple word ‘is’ may invite us to think.
and I cannot undertake the task to thus model Spinoza’s system here.\textsuperscript{257} Hence, I will continue to use the word that can best express the relation $x$ has to $y$ when all of $y$’s being can be predicated of $x$: that word is ‘is’.

It is important to realize Spinoza’s picture of causality needs the “insofar as”-locution. Whenever we are considering some limited manifestation of activity, God must be both the subject of that activity (as per his absolute infinity) and the cause that some of his activity is limited. But he cannot be the cause of a limitation in his own activity unless he can cause it “insofar as” he is a finite thing. The “insofar as”-locution makes it possible for God to be the subject of all activity and some activity nonetheless being limited: God \textit{tout court} is the subject of \textit{all} activity, God insofar as he is a finite thing is the subject of some \textit{specific} activity and God insofar as he is some \textit{other} finite thing is the cause of that specific activity being limited.\textsuperscript{258} God is thus globally (or infinitely) active at the expense of being locally (or finitely) passive. In the case of my suffering, it so happened that God was globally active by being locally passive where it, for me, matters most: where I am. But so long as I conceive of my true self as God (or, more modestly, as subsisting inextricably united with God) I will rejoice in this, since God, who is (or subsists through) me, could not be active or perfect without me being passive. We find, again, that the normativity of perfection asserts itself here. Why should the fact that God is infinitely active and thus perfect through the suffering of innumerable passivations \textit{justify} these passivations? Only if perfection as such commands a positive evaluation on my part, can I prefer a situation where I can have God’s infinite activity at the expense of my finite passivity to a situation where there are only finite expressions of causal power but where I am not necessitated to suffer. What makes this preference possible is that \textit{infinite causal activity and perfection} is to be valued most high of all.

\textsuperscript{257} For an attempt at this task, see Bledin and Melamed (2019).
\textsuperscript{258} God \textit{simpliciter} does not cause some body to undergo some change. Instead he causes that body to undergo some change insofar as he is himself another body, acting upon it. But where did that body get its impetus from? From God, insofar as he is some third body, and so on to infinity (see 2p6). The same that goes for extension goes for thought (2p9).
In sum, on my reading, sadness can be “activated” in two steps: by (i) identifying (in some way) with God; and (ii) construing God as the cause of that sadness.

One can grasp the metaphysical picture involved in the steps (i)-(ii) by the second kind of knowledge as well as the third. But what distinguishes the third kind of knowledge is the immediate experience of (i). In the third kind of knowledge, the knowing subject reflexively identifies with God. And it does not seem all that surprising that such an experience should be affectively transformative. For by undergoing a kind of apotheosis, one’s emotional state should be transformed.

If this language appears too strong, consider that Spinoza, in 5p36s, approves of the biblical qualification of love of God as “glory”. Spinoza adapts biblical glory for his own purposes and assimilates it with the meaning the word has in his own nomenclature. According to Spinoza, “gloria est acquiescentia in se ipso”: glory is esteem of oneself or perhaps rather coming to rest in oneself (acquiescentia is etymologically derived from quies, which means rest or silence), and occurrences of it can be rationally justified (4p59). On my reading, one estimates one’s mind most reasonably, within the framework of the Spinozist metaphysics, when one acknowledges that for any true or adequate idea, it belongs to one’s mind insofar as God is modified as it. It is, in short, only by partaking of God’s intellectual activity that a human being can know anything at all. If one can esteem oneself as God, one will attain the greatest possible self-esteem, for there can be no greater self to glory in than God’s. It is, I suggest, because the self that one acquiesces in, or esteems, is transformed by divine reflexivity that knowledge of the third kind is so strong.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ One can compare the affective force of this knowledge, accompanied by the greatest possible self-esteem, with how reason can curb passions. An understanding of Spinoza’s account of rational self-therapy is provided by Marshall (2012). On Marshall’s reading, Spinoza’s program for passion control consists in uprooting passionate impulses by practising focused rational activities - e.g. doing metaphysics in order to contain one’s amorous obsession. The problem is that in order for metaphysics to “kill the mood” of amorous obsessions, it must be affectively stronger than these moods (according to 4p7). On my reading, any rational activity, whatever it may be, accompanied by divine reflexivity is more forceful than the same activity divested of this perspective on the self.
Importantly, this reading of the third kind of knowledge is vindicated by the collapse of subjective and objective genitive in the phrase intellectual love of God. By subjective genitive I mean God’s love for $x$. By objective genitive I mean $x$’s love of God. The Latin amor Dei admits of both possibilities. Crucially, the only way in which subjective and objective genitive can collapse is in (reflexive) self-love. And in 5p36c, they do collapse. In this corollary, Spinoza writes that “insofar as God loves himself, he loves men, and consequently [...] God’s love of men and the Mind’s love of God are one and the same”. In 5p36s, Spinoza then states that: “From this we clearly understand wherein our salvation, or blessedness, or Freedom, consists, viz. in a constant and eternal Love of God, or in God’s Love of men.” But if the love God entertains for $x$ (subjective) is the same as $x$’s love of God (objective), then it follows that in experiencing love of God, $x$ also reflexively experiences what it is like to be God (modified as $x$). In other words, the collapse of subjective and objective genitive in love of God shows that the subject reflexively involved in the third kind of knowledge is transformed: it no longer regards itself as something that God is not. In intellectual love of God, divine reflexivity modifies the subjectivity of the knower.

This reading additionally goes some way toward explaining why Spinoza considers the third kind of knowledge to be intuitive and not discursive. I as a knowing subject become intuited under a new guise in the third kind of knowledge. Fundamentally, the third kind of knowledge is not about coming to know something different but in coming to know as something different.

One cannot escape that there is a sense in which I, on this reading, through the third kind of knowledge, surrender some of my autonomy. Because it is likely that I thought I was thinking my own thoughts, while all along I was God, modified as me, thinking God’s thoughts. This reading thus raises the following questions: can the highest perfection and, as a consequence, the highest activity of the mind really consist in the mind’s yielding its “own” activity to God? Does not this reading deny any mental autonomy on the part of humans? Is it not an ideal of perfection which presents the ultimate passivity (yielding one’s subjectivity to a global and overarching subject) as the ultimate activity?
8.4. The perfection of necessity and the activity of passivity.

In order to begin to formulate an answer to the cluster of questions just posed I will attempt to carve out a space for human autonomy in the indivisible bloc of divine activity. That space, however, is not so much a space for us to exert our own agency as a space for us to cease not to exert God’s.

Ontological perfection comes in degrees, and everything that is possesses at least some perfection. The reason things are perfect or real is that they follow “necessarily from a given most perfect nature” (1p33s2). As I have insisted throughout this thesis, the equation of being with perfection is not axiologically innocent. For being, and more specifically, necessary being is supposed to exert a normative pull on us. This becomes explicit in Spinoza’s surprising claim that “insofar as we understand we want nothing but what is necessary” (4app G. II/276). The passage is important as it shows that ontological perfection is also normative for Spinoza: for rational agents, x’s being necessarily caused by God for some reason also invests it with value, and more precisely with the kind of value that should make us want for it to obtain. This clearly indicates that the fact that being is necessitated does not, or at least is not intended to, destroy all value.

On my reading, the reason why we ought to want what is necessary is that only what is necessitated can be perfect and perfection, even though it is ontological, exerts a normative pull on us when we are rational. For Spinoza, the dimension of value is not erected on the fundament of things possibly having been otherwise. Consider again that the perfection/activity of our mind consists in understanding. When we understand, however, we want what is necessary since it is perfect.\(^\text{260}\)

\(^\text{260}\) There is an interesting loop here that deserves to be mentioned. The way I read Thus Spoke Zarathustra, that book is about overcoming the thought of the eternal return. Zarathustra overcomes that thought by affirming it (a task he accomplishes in the Nacht-Wanderer Lied). But this means affirming eternally recurring affirmation, too. Similarly, Spinoza encourages us to want what is necessary at all costs. This includes wanting to necessarily want what is necessary. On the Nietzschean picture, to bend one’s will in such a way that it aligns perfectly with what necessarily recurs, requires a will-power of superhuman magnitude. Similarly, it seems, to want what is necessary - even necessarily - would appear to be possible at best only for a chosen few. Spinoza does not explicitly discuss this loop.
Not only is the perfection of the things we contemplate rooted in God’s nature, so also is the contemplation itself. Spinoza’s perfectionist program consists in giving humans the theoretical means to reflexively acknowledge God’s perfection: and in acknowledging that their intellectual enjoyment of things is his, their freedom and perfection is maximized (for the alignment of freedom and perfection, see 5p36s). This is because, by consciously identifying with God, I can as it were appropriate God’s activity. When I am passive - when I suffer from God’s self-passivation - as God, this passivity is seen as a manifestation of activity. For God is infinitely active not only by being so simpliciter, but by suffering infinite passivations at his own hands. Since I remain a thing limited in space and time, I continue to undergo passions. But I now see them in a different light. Let me explain more clearly how this is possible.

The highest form of human perfection consists in love of God. On my interpretation, God is infinitely worthy of love because he is infinitely perfect. But God cannot be infinitely perfect without also being infinitely active. According to Spinoza’s picture of causality, God cannot be infinitely active without being finitely passive and I am one of these finite things. For this reason, the highest form of human activity may be said to consist in a reflected or informed kind of passivity. The passive state is the finite human condition. It is converted into activity by the third kind of knowledge where the mind reflects upon itself as God. Whatever the third kind of knowledge may contain in addition, it contains at least an adequate idea of God as a cause of one’s activity being limited. One’s passivity vis-à-vis the world is the inevitable outcome of divine activity. But by coming to love God as oneself, one can convert that passivity into activity.

Interestingly, this is the sole space which is reserved for strictly human autonomy.

In thinking adequate ideas, my ideas are God’s. When I am deluded, however, I am something that God is not. But since there is no being which God does not, as it were, appropriate, this means that to the extent that I have inadequate ideas, I am not. In ontological terms, to the extent that I am not God, I am nothing at all. In terms of activity, if I do not carry out God’s actions in acting, I do not act at all. If there is to be any space for human and non-divine mental agency it can
therefore only consist in the phasing out of ideas inadequate in myself, whereby nothing changes in the global deposit of ideas in God’s intellect.\textsuperscript{261} In sum, while there is only divine agency, there is also human passivity. But when properly reflected, human passivity can become divine agency.

\textit{Polemical conclusion.}

That the distinction between subjective and objective genitive is abolished in the phrase of “God’s love” is a stock theme in various mystic traditions. “According to the mystics, God alone can say ‘I’”, as Cioran (1995) wrote. Spinoza’s account of love of God shows that he, too, subscribed to this view: man’s love for God is nothing but God’s love, modified as that man, for himself. To merely observe this similarity would be of little philosophical interest. The collapse of subjective and objective genitive in Spinoza’s concept of intellectual love of God is of importance for this thesis since that mental state is also described as the apex of human perfection.

Let me end this chapter by pointing out how my reading of Spinoza is different from a prevalent interpretation. Even in the absence of a dominant religious mainstream demanding genuine human freedom as a necessary condition for the salvation of souls, contemporary philosophers are more anxious than ever to safeguard human agency and “robust” human activity, even in the realm of Spinoza studies.\textsuperscript{262} This is related, of course, to the fact that human perfectionism, outside the realm of Spinoza studies, is commonly defined in solely active terms.

\textsuperscript{261} In this, agree with the reading of Spinoza’s ontology presented in Della Rocca (2008b), but would like emphasize to a greater extent than he does the paradoxical consequences for Spinoza’s \textit{ethics}.

\textsuperscript{262} See, for instance, Sangiacomo and Nachtomy (2018). On the view of Sangiacomo and Nachtomy, activity (and hence perfection) can be predicated of finite modes “in a robust sense” because finite modes can be the adequate causes of effects. I disagree with their reading on two counts, and would like to comment on a, crucial, third point. First, Sangiacomo and Nachtomy present the two stages of Spinoza’s development as follows: “instead of viewing the activity of finite modes as completely subordinate to God’s immanent activity [as Spinoza did in the KV] he presents [in the \textit{Ethics}] God’s own activity as fully expressed by the activity of finite modes” (2018, p. 113). As these two alternatives stand they appear not to be mutually exclusive at all, and Sangiacomo and Nachtomy also fail to establish that they are so. If someone’s activity is to fully “express”
 Whereas a contemplative ideal of human perfection was enjoined in Book X of Aristotle’s *Nicohmachean Ethics*, Hurka’s modified Aristotelian account - typical for our time - emphasizes the active development of one’s talents as the primary intrinsic good that one has a self-regarding duty to aim at. These talents consist in a capacity for physical or mental perfection, whether the latter be the capacity for theoretical or practical rationality. Hurka (1993, p. 56) does not consider contemplative virtues as even partially constitutive of theoretical rationality.

In a similar vein, Spinoza is sometimes read as someone carving out an enormous space for human activity and expansion. This is natural given Spinoza’s apparent celebration of perfection as human activity. One example of such a reading is to

my activity, then the activity of what fully expresses my activity cannot do anything contrary to my design. Consider for example the activity of, say, an artificially intelligent robot that I have designed to carry out my own activity. This robot, it seems, must be “completely subordinate” to my activity in order to “express” it. Second, Sangiacomo and Nachtomy nowhere define what they mean by ‘active in a robust sense’. But unless activity can be predicated of modes without also being predicated of substance, the activity of the modes will always supernene on the activity of the substance. Since activity cannot be predicated of modes unless it is also being predicated of substance, it is far from clear that modes can be active in a robust sense, if one takes that to mean the subjects of an activity _exclusively_ theirs. Third, and most importantly, Sangiacomo and Nachtomy suggest that “[i]n the Ethics, what makes finite modes active (in the sense of being ‘adequate cause’ [sic]) is the connection between their own essence and the effects they produce. This apparently subtle change suggests that finite modes can be active in a more robust sense than the one presented in the KV”. I grant that this is true. _But importantly, as I have sought to show in this chapter, human beings can be the adequate cause of an idea of their utter ontological dependence on God._ This idea reveals to them that their activity is _not_ theirs. In this way, Spinoza’s philosophy of activity in the _Ethics_ is more two-edged than commentators who only emphasize the “robust” sense in which finite things are active tend to acknowledge.

In general, I agree with Koistinen’s observation (2009, p. 154) that the problem of “how can there be, in such a system, where all actions are of God, a multitude of freely acting agents?” takes as its point of departure a difference between God and others which Spinoza’s monism does not quite admit. Yet, the question is if Koistinen’s own interpretation does not relapse into this difference when he formulates his assignment as follows: “It should be explicated how is it possible, as it were, that God thinks A by my thinking of A, so that both I and God are _genuine thinkers of that thought_” (2009, p. 157: Emphasis added). The just emphasised sentence shows that Koistinen’s concern, as Sangiacomo’s and Nachtomy’s, is to defend some robust form of human agency in Spinozism. Yet, the divide between naturing nature and natured nature indicates that for Spinoza, my mind belongs to the same ontological category as any one thought (or idea). At the risk of muddling the waters further, I would venture to say that genuine doer of some deed should not belong to the same ontological category as the deed. If this principle is accurate, then God alone is the genuine thinker of all thoughts.
be found in Kisner (2011, p. 5), who claims that human perfection, for Spinoza, is for us to “stamp our causal footprint on the world”. Of course, Kisner is right: because of the equivalence between causal activity and perfection, what he says follows rigorously. The production of effects is entailed by all existence, and (ontological) perfection is by definition co-extensive with such activity. I am therefore not claiming that Kisner is simply wrong.

In this chapter, however, I hope I have shown that Spinoza’s celebration of human activity is more two-edged than is acknowledged by readings such as Kisner’s. Spinoza does not merely enjoin us to “stamp our causal footprint on the world”: if the normative dimension of Spinoza’s perfectionism came down only to this, there would be too little difference between him and the most common among career advice manuals. I have defended a view of Spinoza’s perfectionism as ultimately speculative in the sense that human perfection consists in consciously reflecting divine perfection and agency. Kisner’s reading of the human good in Spinoza is pluralistic and humanistic. My reading focalizes on the highest human good in Spinoza’s philosophy and since this good is unique, there is no pluralism in this regard.\footnote{This Kisner’s reading is pluralist in the sense that he maintains that for Spinoza, the “good life” consists in the exertion of many virtues, some of which are non-intellectual. See Kisner (2011, p. 5): “While Spinoza admittedly holds that our power is best served by leading a rational life (4app5), this does not imply a preference for intellectual activities. For he holds that rational ideas increase our activity not only in the abstract metaphysical sense of increasing our mental power, but also in a practical sense, by directing us to engage actively in the world through the formation of friendship, treating others with kindness and participation in the life of the state.” It should be noted that I do not claim that the previously cited statement is wrong. For Kisner to be wrong here would be for Spinoza to hold that the exertion of reason would not be conducive to social harmony. But I am aware of no philosophers who have maintained the view that rationality as such is not conducive but instead harmful to social cohesion. Kisner thus defends a Spinoza who disagrees with none. And of course, it is not the case that Spinoza disagrees with us on exactly every score. But in this thesis I have been more preoccupied with the controversial (and unfashionable) aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy - and Spinoza appears to be most in opposition to our contemporary sensibilities in his theory of ideal perfection. Human perfection is the enjoyment of a good. But the good in the enjoyment of which our highest perfection can consist is clearly intellectual in nature (and may, for this reason, unlike other goods, be indiscriminately shared). See for instance TTP, IV [16], C. II. 129: “This [sc. highest] good consists only in contemplation and a pure mind.”}
identifying with what is not human. It may be worthwhile to linger for awhile on this observation.

The reflexive idea of God’s thinking one’s “own” thought is adequate in the human mind. As previously stated, that it is adequate means that the essence of the human mind (as unimpeded by external forces) has within itself the resources to bring forth an idea about its own ontological dependence on God. For an idea is adequate in a mind when the essence of that mind has within itself the resources to produce that idea. But the ontological dependence in question is so extreme that all of the mind’s being, perfection and causal activity must be ultimately predicated of God, including the mind’s realization of its own dependence. On my reading, the human mind has thus within itself the resources to deconstruct its own apparent independence and contingency. For it can, by acquiring adequate understanding of God as absolutely infinite, infer that its activity is not properly speaking its own. Thus, in contrast with Kisner, I suggest that the highest human perfection for Spinoza consists in realizing that one’s causal footprint is not human at all - it was in this sense that I ventured to call my reading antihumanistic.264

My reading has the advantage of savouring the strangeness of Spinoza’s system. However, in the eyes of contemporary perfectionists, it has the disadvantage of dethroning the active “stamping of one’s own footprint on the world” as the ultimate human accomplishment. But given the status of the world - I am thinking of the ecological crisis of our time - perhaps it would be more virtuous to begin with erasing our footprints, carbon and others. And indeed, in the third kind of knowledge, the first human mark of all - that of an autonomous self - is erased from a mind that thereby does not lose, but instead gains, its true identity.

264 For a somewhat different take on the topic of antihumanism in Spinoza, see Melamed (2011).
Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have tried to accomplish two distinct tasks. First, I have presented a reading of Spinoza’s philosophy based on the normativity of his concept of ontological perfection (contrary to the reading of several other commentators). That is, I have presented a theory of human perfection in Spinoza’s philosophy which strives to accommodate, rather than to bypass, an apparent absurdity at the heart of his system: his alignment of being and value. Second, I have sought to highlight the practical role divine infinity plays in the (speculative) perfection of humans in an attempt to reconcile perfection monism and human perfection.

At first, I laid the groundwork by analyzing Spinoza’s different concepts of perfection, distinguishing ontological perfection from its teleological counterpart. Ontological perfection is for Spinoza the same as reality, being and causal power. I argued that, in spite of his statements to the contrary, ontological perfection in Spinoza’s philosophy plays the role of a transcendental. By a transcendental is meant a property that is coextensive yet not co-intensional with being. Such transcendentals were an important feature of the Scholastic thought landscape. This result is important to the historian of philosophy, since it shows how Spinoza, in this regard, breaks with tradition only by radically embracing it. More importantly, however, interpreting Spinoza’s ontological perfection as a transcendental allows us to appreciate how that property can shoulder a normative role. For, by considering being as co-extensive with perfection, Spinoza - after the manner of the Scholastics who considered it co-extensive with the good - arrives at a kind of justification of being. Yet the value that, on Spinoza’s view, redeems

---

265 Most importantly Newlands (2017); but see also Broad (2001) and Jarrett (2014).
being is incommensurable with the values that we in ordinary life appeal to and live by.

If ethical progress is to be held against a standard with a solid basis in reality, it is not to be evaluated in terms that lack ontological grounding. On my reading, Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection is indeed ontologically grounded. Therefore, evaluations in terms of good and evil are tangential to the ontological ideal of human perfection that Spinoza advances. For such evaluations are teleological: they state one’s relative progress in developmental processes toward a merely subjective ideal and such subjectively perfective standards fail to express real properties of things. The fact that ontological perfection, in spite of being a value, is a value markedly different from the values that ordinarily function as motivators, results in an account of ethics that is very particular. Throughout this thesis, I have sought to highlight this by pointing at the oftentimes controversial consequences of transcendental perfection for Spinoza’s ethics. I will here only mention two such consequences, both of which appear prima facie paradoxical.

The first consequence I would like to highlight is that human beings can, seemingly paradoxically, gain in perfection by (speculatively) acknowledging the perfection which is already theirs. Although human beings are ontologically perfect to the extent that they are, they are not aware of this perfection merely in virtue of being. On my reading, Spinoza’s ideal of human perfection consists exactly in the attainment of a perspective on the world and oneself from which ontological perfection may be spotted - my reading is thus significantly different from the humanistic and pluralistic one proposed by Kisner (2011). A sine qua non condition of attaining such knowledge is coming to know God, and more precisely to know him as God and consciously. For the transcendental perfection of being is grounded in the fact that all being is necessitated by an absolutely infinite and supremely perfect God. It is thus because (a) Spinoza’s account of human perfection is speculative, and because (b) one will be able to establish the (ontological) perfection of things only by deducing it from the divine essence, that (c) the absolute infinity of the divine essence plays a significant role in Spinoza’s account of human perfection. But how exactly can one come to regard the world and oneself in such a way as to become speculatively perfect? In this dissertation,
I have discussed three perspectival shifts constitutive of speculative perfection (though I admit there may be others). Each of them crucially involves the notion of infinity.

By changing the lens through which we regard the actually infinite causal chain producing our chagrins, we can come to conceive of them as necessary. Thus conceiving them is a therapeutic measure against oversensitivity to suffering. But it is not only that. For the only way in which we can, on Spinoza’s view, conceptualize the infinite chain unfolding behind every chagrin of ours in order to realize the necessity of that chain, is by considering it as a qualitative infinity. The one qualitative infinity we paradigmatically know is that of the attributes. But how is one to conceptually model one’s understanding of one infinity (that of the modes) on one’s understanding of another infinity (that of the attributes)? I have argued that if such modelling is to be at all possible, our knowledge of the infinity of the attributes must, on Spinoza’s view, be epistemically prior to that of the modes. I have showed that in this context, we once more find a familiar medieval theory - analogy - applied in a radical way.

It is by changing the lens through which we regard any potential attribute (any self-contained dimension in which causal chains unfold) that we come to regard the attributes under which we (know ourselves to) exist, as God. The conceptualization of our own existential milieu (extension and thought) as global ways God is, is obtained only from the definition of God as absolutely infinite. For it follows from Spinoza’s definition of God as absolutely infinite that anything that can be conceived as an attribute must be one.

By changing, at last, the lens through which we regard ourselves we pass (speculatively) to the summit of perfection (which we ontologically have already attained). This transformed reflexivity is, on my reading, what distinguishes the third kind of knowledge from knowledge of the second kind and also what explains its superiority. This is the second paradox I would like to highlight. The third kind of knowledge is said to obtain when a human being is maximally endowed with perfection through the causation of an idea that stems from her nature. But that idea is about God as a cause. The way an absolutely infinite God
acts as a cause is by appropriating the cau- sation of all effects and thus, by employment of the definitional machinery, *all perfection*. Crucially, in the third kind of knowledge, on my reading, the human subject knows that even her thinking of the idea of God as a cause is thought by God. So, the perfection with which she is endowed through thinking that thought is not, ultimately, hers. The paradox is that the maximal perfection and activity of a human being should consist in relinquishment of any perfection and activity that she can properly call her *own*. This reading goes against a recent trend in the scholarship - namely that of finding place for “robust” and “genuine” human agency in Spinozism.\(^{266}\)

In fact, this result was to be expected. For whereas the transcendental good on the scholastic view was true of all being because all being was created by God, for Spinoza, the grounding of transcendental perfection in God is more intimate. More precisely, the reason why things are perfect to the extent that they are, is that to the extent that they are, they are God (modified as those things) and God is supremely perfect. Speculative perfection can only obtain when this is realized. For it is only by judging their own perfection to consist in being *necessarily* brought forth by God that human beings can become conscious of already possessing ontological perfection. And things are necessarily brought forth by God because God is necessary and things *are* God existing in a certain way. It is worth lingering for a moment on how Spinoza, on this reading, seeks to reconcile necessity with perfectionism.

Necessitarianism destroys contingency and thereby arguably also deep moral responsibility, which is founded on the former. Yet, on my reading, for Spinoza human perfection consists in speculatively acknowledging one’s ontological perfection. Everything is (ontologically) perfect since it is necessitated by a supremely perfect God. Hence, one cannot become (speculatively) perfect unless one can first appreciate the value of being necessitated by God. The very “fatal necessity” which is commonly thought to ruin morality thus becomes the vehicle for a *new value* which we must appreciate in order to become perfect in the

\(^{266}\) See Kisner (2011); Sangiacomo and Nachtomy (2018) and Koistinen (2009) for examples of such readings.
ultimate sense. In this way, necessity is a “principal foundation” not only for the TTP (as Spinoza acknowledges in Letter 75, C. II. 470) but for his philosophy of human perfection in the *Ethics* as well.

By granting Spinoza that being is necessitated and arguing that for him being necessitated is in turn valuable, I have sought to integrate into one account the seemingly incompatible doctrines of necessitarianism and human perfectionism. Nonetheless, readers will have noticed that I have not dealt in any detail with the following question: what sense is there in treating speculative perfection as somehow normatively enjoined if all our actions, including all our thoughts, are necessitated (or even just, more modestly, determined)? This question is worth asking, but it is an objection that faces all determinism. To adapt any one compatibilism to suit Spinoza’s purposes would not add much either to our understanding of the opposition between determinism and morality and its resolution, nor to our understanding of Spinoza’s thinking per se, which does not directly engage with that particular problem. For this reason, I have sought to articulate his theory of human perfection without proposing any independent solution to this age-old problem.

Of course, further research is required. There are two areas of particular interest.

First, there is the relevance of aspects of my work for environmental philosophy. One obvious objection to Spinoza’s philosophy of perfection is its apparent neglect of teleologically established values. One might suspect that this neglect of the human perspective would inspire attitudes of moral defeatism. Nonetheless, it is of potential interest to contemporary environmental thought. In traditional (Aristotelian) accounts of human perfection, what kind of perfection humans can aspire to has long been an issue dealt with by first inquiring into the human *essence*. By contrast, Spinoza’s overall philosophy of perfection can be interpreted as indicating a different, and less anthropocentric, approach to the issue. For Spinoza, no viable ideal of human perfection is forthcoming unless we ponder the whole of Nature to which we owe our existence, and our proper place in it. Of course, nature as we know it, our life-supporting system on this planet, does not meet Spinoza’s criteria for what counts as God or Nature. Nonetheless,
we still stand in the same relation to nature as Spinoza thought humankind did to
God: we can neither be nor be conceived without it. To formulate an ethical
perfectionism which takes nature as its starting point and only then strives to
situate the role of human perfection within this larger scheme seems to be an
intellectual obligation in our world of environmental crisis.

Second, there is important work to be undertaken in the field of comparative
philosophy. I have previously noted that there is a striking formal similarity
between Spinoza and the accounts of human perfection given by Eastern
traditions. For example, a noteworthy similarity obtains between the Buddhist
Madhyamika understanding of nirvana and the philosophy of perfection which
emerges from my analysis of Spinoza’s works. According to an idea expounded
first and foremost by Nagarjuna, nirvana and samsara are different only from the
point of view of samsara. From the point of view of nirvana, they are no longer
different, but rather identical. (Samsara is the unenlightened state of continuous
rebirth.) My interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy can be similarly expressed in
the following paradox: perfection and imperfection are different only from the
point of view of imperfection. From the point of view of perfection, they are no
longer different, but rather identical. The paradox is to be explicated thus: once
one conceptualizes perfection as a transcendental rather than teleologically, one
will recognize that things one previously judged imperfect are in fact perfect, to
the extent that they are at all. One may want to say that the fact that there is such
an explication - the one provided by this dissertation - only shows that there was
no paradox there in the first place; it merely arose because one equivocated on the
word ‘perfection’. The equivocation obtains since the overcome concept of
perfection and the ultimate concept of perfection are expressed by the same word.
*But perhaps this is in itself significant.*

In this regard, the parallel to nirvana can help. One reason why samsara and
nirvana are seen to be the same from the point of view of nirvana may be that
nirvana is inherently a transitional concept. By this I mean that it is defined as the
overcoming of a previous ethical stage, such that the two stages can only be
thought of as different before the ultimate stage is reached. Likewise, for Spinoza,
perfection is similarly transitional. Teleological perfection and imperfection can
only be thought of as ontologically different prior to one’s attainment of speculative perfection. Just as nirvana, when attained, renegotiates the difference between samsara and nirvana, so speculative perfection renegotiates the difference between (teleologically conceived) perfection and imperfection. My conjecture is that in other soteriologies too, one attains the ultimate state (whether it be salvation or liberation) when one abandons a misleading conceptualization of what such a state would amount to. An interesting task far beyond the scope of the present dissertation would be to comparatively explore this feature of philosophical soteriologies in different cultures.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


REFERENCES


Fraenkel, Carlos (2009). Hasdai Crescas on God as the Place of the World and Spinoza’s Notion of God as "Res Extensa”. Aleph, No. 9.1: 77—111.


Geach, Peter (1967). “Good and Evil”. In Foot (ed.), Theories of Ethics. New York : Oxford University Press.


Lin, Martin (2018). *Being and Reason* (upublished manuscript).


