

SUFFICIENT REASON AND THE CAUSAL ARGUMENT FOR MONISM

Landon FRIM*

Abstract. What is the role of the principle of sufficient reason in Baruch Spinoza's ontological proof for God's existence? Is this role identical within Spinoza's early work on method, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, and his magnum opus, the *Ethics*? This paper argues affirmatively that the methodology employed within the *Ethics* is consonant with that method found within the *Treatise*, and this claim is substantiated through an engagement with the influential works of Don Garrett and Aaron Garrett. It is also demonstrated through an original reconstruction of the *Treatise* itself. In this reconstruction, basic premises are identified which can validly prove Spinoza's intended conclusion of substance monism. It is finally determined that what the *Treatise* and the *Ethics* share, specifically, is a methodology which begins with non-nominal definitions that denote the real, sufficient causes of their respective objects. However, at certain junctures, this methodology is expressed with greater consistency within the *Treatise* as opposed to within the *Ethics*. Evidence for this will be provided from the primary texts themselves and from the subsequent analyses of Don Garrett and Aaron Garret as well.

Keywords: Spinoza, principle of sufficient reason, Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, ontological

Introduction

Baruch Spinoza's argument for substance monism is as important as it is controversial. The notion that the whole universe is a singular, unbroken entity, that this entity is without beginning, end, or limit, and that it operates solely according to its own immanent, inviolable laws – these features of Spinoza's universe form the metaphysical bedrock of his Early Modern brand of rationalism. The regularity of these laws is inextricably tied to Spinoza's conception of the *principle of sufficient reason* (hereafter abbreviated as the "PSR"). It is this rule, which holds that "for every x, if x exists, then there is some sufficient cause for x to obtain," that mandates the regularity and intelligibility of the monistic universe. For if all events are sufficiently caused, and secondly, if all causes are themselves immanent to Nature, then all

* Harriman Hall 215 The Philosophy Department, Stony Brook University Stony Brook, NY 11794, e-mail: frimphilosophy@yahoo.com

occurrences are, in principle, explainable and comprehensible. All manner of miracles, mysteries, divine interventions, and premodern obstacles to knowledge are wholly precluded.

However it is for just this reason that Spinoza's argument for substance monism has historically been so very controversial. If successful, it precludes traditional theism which posits the existence of a personal and transcendent deity. It moreover precludes that such a deity, as well as finite human beings themselves, can ever possess an undetermined, free will (understood negatively as *libero arbitrio*). Along with this natural determinism, as well as the preclusion of anything *supernatural* which could possibly transcend this determinism, a whole new view of human existence, morality, and politics is born. Man is no longer considered to be an *imperium in imperio*,¹ a unique creation subject to its own laws, apart from the fundamental laws of nature. Deprived of a radically unique and free will, traditional conceptions of "sin," "evil," and "culpability" are rendered senseless. What replaces these is a new vision of man, wholly natural and always acting according to deterministic, rational principles. Instances of apparent evil-doing are truly the result of naturally-occurring ignorance and not radical evil. The new goal in morality and politics becomes not the atonement of sins by the free grace of God (through the medium of the institutional Church); instead it is the progressive education of man. The lifting of human beings out of ignorance, the restoration of man's innate, rational faculties is the new key to moral rectitude and political stability. Needless to say, all of this wholly undermines what were the traditional pillars of European society throughout pre-modernity.

While some criticisms of Spinoza's monism have centered upon these moral and theological concerns specifically, others have tried a different track altogether – striking at the heart of the rationalist method which serves as monism's intellectual support. From Spinoza's contemporaries up to the present day, the critics of monism have perennially sought to deny the self-sufficiency of reason. This is perhaps best articulated by the 20th century political philosopher, Leo Strauss. In his preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1965) the conservative Strauss tries to defend orthodoxy against the monistic rationalism of Spinoza and modernity. In doing so, Strauss does not directly defend the various propositions of religious orthodoxy themselves. Instead he merely undermines the certainty and self-sufficiency of competing reason, lowering its basic principles to the level of mere "hypothetical" assertions. In this way, the resulting rationalist view of the universe, one which precludes the mysterious God of the Bible, becomes equally as hypothetical.

The orthodox premise cannot be refuted by experience nor by recourse to the principle of contradiction . . . The genuine refutation of orthodoxy would require the proof that the world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of a

mysterious God; it would require at least the success of the philosophic system . . . Spinoza's *Ethics* attempts to be the system, but it does not succeed; the clear and distinct account of everything which it presents remains fundamentally hypothetical.²

What Leo Strauss claims in this and surrounding passages is that the intelligibility of the world is the one thing necessary to establish the supremacy of reason over orthodox faith. Yet the total intelligibility of the universe is far from an obvious or self-evident premise. If anything, it is a claim which, itself, is dependent upon the prior affirmation, *and use*, of a robust faculty of reason. Yet it is entirely unclear that our belief in reason is, in the first place, warranted. At long last, claims Strauss, the rationalist narrative must rely upon a free choice of faith in order to affirm its fundamental rationalist principles. Hence, in the end, it is no superior to religious orthodoxy. To the contrary, at least orthodoxy is explicit and honest about its reliance upon faith and non-evident premises.

The Circularity of “Intelligibility” and “Reason”

At the very core of Strauss' critique is the charge that reason's claim to self-sufficiency is unproven and that it begs the question. For instance, the universal principle of sufficient reason claims that every given thing has a definite cause for its particular existence. Otherwise, asserts the rationalist, the entity in question would be wholly unfathomable and absurd, lacking all intelligibility. It would remain entirely cut off from the apprehension of human reason. Hence, the principle of sufficient reason *is itself* indisputable. For without it, many absurd and unintelligible things may follow.

To this, however, Strauss might simply shrug his shoulders. Perhaps it *is* indeed the case that some things in the universe are unfathomable and strike human reason as “absurd.” It may be true that the human intellect operates according to the lawful principles of cause and effect. It may be true, therefore, that the human mind can only apprehend that which, in the universe, similarly operates according to regular, intelligible, causal laws. Nonetheless why should we assume that absolutely *everything* in reality is in fact intelligible or operates in this manner? Why should we assume a neat matching-up of the human faculty of reason and the intelligibility of the greater world? To the conservative critics of Spinozist rationalism this appears to be merely a brute attempt to fit the world into the Procrustean bed of human thought. In short, assert such critics, the universality of sufficient reason may be a viable hypothesis, but it is in no way a necessary one.

Bolstering this suspicion of the PSR is the principle's apparent “dual-nature.” On the one hand the PSR is clearly metaphysical – claiming a cause for everything in reality; on the other hand it is epistemological – describing the manner in which our mind only conceives of things by seeking reasons for their existence. Along these same lines, the PSR can be understood as wholly descriptive – both of

the way the world and our minds work; but it can also be seen as a normative rule – asserting how one *ought* to seek sufficient reasons before assenting to a given idea or judgment. Even the most enthusiastic Spinoza analysts point out this “double use of the PSR.” For example, in the opening pages of Michael Della Rocca’s recent work, *Spinoza* (2008), he identifies Spinoza’s key concepts of “correctness,” “reason,” and “causation” with that of “intelligibility.” Della Rocca goes on to show, ultimately, that in Spinoza’s system the PSR serves as the nexus of explanation and causation.³ Indeed, in the *Ethics* Spinoza famously employs the phrase *causa seu ratio*, i.e. “cause or reason,” in his seminal proof for substance monism.⁴

Again, however, the trouble arises if each half of the PSR is meant to be the support of the other. In other words, is the normative, epistemological principle that we must only assent to that which comes with an intelligible, sufficient reason the support for affirming a picture of a causally deterministic universe, and vice versa? If true, this would certainly be an instance of vicious circularity. It is a troubling charge which is only given further plausibility by Spinoza’s strong doctrine of parallelism between things and ideas as found in part two of the *Ethics*: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.”⁵ These universal principles which claim to say something about the intelligibility of all reality, while also affirming the rectitude of human reason, certainly seem to cohere well with one another. Nonetheless, the pertinent question is whether we must accept this set of mutually consistent rules and laws in the first place. If so, then it must be on the basis of something more than mere faith, arbitrary choice, or circular reasoning.

Problematic as it may be, one cannot simply do away with the PSR - it is far too central to Spinoza’s system and his overall commitment to a metaphysics of deterministic monism. Rather, what is needed is an analysis of precisely *how* the principle can be validly derived without charges of circularity or begging the question arising. Yet, one can easily mistake Spinoza’s magnum opus, the *Ethics*, as lacking such a demonstration altogether. It would *seem* that in the opening pages of the *Ethics*, the PSR is bluntly affirmed as a normative rule of thought, something which is prior to, or hovers above, the actual universe: “For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence.”⁶ Indeed, this striking statement comes in the body of a demonstration and is not the proposition itself. In other words, it is simply stated rather than supported by a dedicated proof. Spinoza’s claim, therefore, is that not only does the whole universe operate according to intelligible relations of cause and effect, but also our faculty of reason is fully competent to determine or “assign” what these are.

This is potentially disturbing for two reasons. First, as discussed earlier, such a blanket statement smacks of arbitrary fiat. It is as though Spinoza affirms this universal law of nature because it conforms to an equally total view of human reason. Meanwhile, neither proposition has, apparently, been adequately defended or explained. Second, such universal, normative statements do not cohere with the

rest of Spinoza's thought. Indeed, a broader examination of Spinoza's writings reveals an outright contempt for positing abstract methods or rules *prior* to our having specific, true ideas about the world. This is especially the case if one takes into account Spinoza's statements as found within his early work, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (hereafter abbreviated as the *Treatise*).

To this end, the remainder of this article will focus upon Spinoza's derivation of the PSR and substance monism within the *Treatise*. For it is my contention that Spinoza's mature argument in the *Ethics* is actually largely consonant with that found in the *Treatise*, especially in the manner in which it combats skeptical objections. Yet, in several instances, the *Treatise* makes more explicit that which, in the *Ethics*, appears to be assumed or posited. The discovery of this explicit proof as found in the *Treatise* will require something of a creative reconstruction on my part as the *Treatise* itself was never completed during Spinoza's lifetime.

Finally, it will be shown that Spinoza's ontological proof in the *Ethics* is, in fact, *not* vulnerable to common charges of "arbitrary fiat," precisely because it shares a very similar methodology with the *Treatise*, properly reconstructed. Specifically, it will be shown that the ontological proof in the *Ethics* utilizes an implicit premise, that of the principle of sufficient reason, in validly defeating skeptical objections to substance monism. In comparing the mature *Ethics* to the earlier *Treatise* it will be indispensable to reference the work of Don Garrett, and specifically his highly influential article, "Spinoza's 'Ontological' Argument."⁷ For it is in this watershed work that Garrett delineates precisely how this strategy of "implicit premises" is actually used within the *Ethics* to prove monism. I shall also engage with the work of Aaron Garrett, and *his* influential work on the specific methodologies of the *Treatise*, and how these are translated into the geometric proofs of the *Ethics*. It will be the overall purpose of this article to examine precisely how this strategy of Spinoza's mature *Ethics* both coheres and diverges from the similar one as found in the earlier *Treatise*.

The Primacy of Truth over Method

When examining the *Treatise* the very first thing that the reader will notice is, as stated above, Spinoza's outright disapproval for the stipulation of abstract rules and methodologies. Spinoza argues that commencing with a supposedly perfect rule or method, prior to having an adequate idea about the world itself, inevitably leads to an infinite regress. Such an abstract and universal rule, ungrounded in any certainly true idea about the universe, will always require some other abstract rule as its proof. Ultimately, there will be no end to the search for methodological guarantee, and the whole enterprise will lack sufficient foundation. As such, all philosophical speculation must commence, not with an abstract and universal method, but rather with specific and certainly true ideas. Only from this first seed of knowledge can a properly grounded method emerge.

. . .the first thing we must consider is that there is no infinite regress here. That is, to find the best Method of seeking the truth, there is no need of another Method to seek the Method of seeking the truth, or of a third Method to seek the second, and so on, to infinity. For in that way we would never arrive at knowledge of the truth, or indeed at any knowledge.⁸

And also:

From this it may be inferred that Method is nothing but a reflexive knowledge, or an idea of an idea; and because there is no idea of an idea, unless there is first an idea, there will be no Method unless there is first an idea. So that Method will be good which shows how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of a given true idea.⁹

In short, methods and rules may indeed materialize within a mature system. Nonetheless, these must be grounded first in some certain and concrete idea of reality itself. Otherwise we are left with little more than a grand edifice built upon a foundation of sand. An implication of this is that no rule, or in other words, no general “sign” can indicate what is to be considered a true idea. Rather, for Spinoza, truth must be something which is self-evident. Truth must present *itself* as an intrinsic feature of an idea. “And from this, again, it is clear that, for the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea.”¹⁰

Moreover, it is not only that Spinoza mandates that we *ought* to possess a certainly true idea before attempting to construct a method or develop abstract rules of thought. Instead, with strict consistency, Spinoza positively asserts that we *do*, in fact, possess some definite knowledge.¹¹ This assertion that we must possess at least one true idea is the very cornerstone of Spinoza’s philosophic thought as found in the *Treatise*; though it is a point generally downplayed amongst the geometric demonstrations of the *Ethics*.

Importantly, Spinoza’s claim that we indeed possess some knowledge is one which is at once a priori and at the same time non-abstract; it is a claim about the world itself. Differing from the majority of contemporary philosophers, influenced as they are by Kantian epistemology, Spinoza’s first premise is always that we must in fact know something *about reality*, not about the phenomenal appearance of reality, and not about the nature of our own apperception, but reality itself. That we must possess at least one true idea is a proposition that Spinoza takes to be entirely non-controversial. Simply put, to claim otherwise is to lapse into absurdity and self-contradiction. Positing that we have no knowledge whatsoever is, after all, a sort of truth claim. In this way, the total or global skeptic occupies a position that is hardly tenable. Spinoza’s biting sarcasm in considering such a position is easily seen:

But perhaps, afterwards, some Skeptic would still doubt both the first truth itself and everything we shall deduce according to the standard of the first truth . . . [But in this case] If they affirm or doubt something, they do not know that they affirm or doubt. They say they know nothing, and that they do not even know that they know nothing. And even this they do not say absolutely. For they are afraid to confess that they exist, so long as they know nothing. In the end, they must be speechless, lest by chance they assume something that might smell of truth . . . If they deny, grant, or oppose, they do not know that they deny, grant, or oppose. So they must be regarded as automata, completely lacking a mind.¹²

At least for now, Spinoza's first premise leaves untouched the position of the partial or Pyrrhonic skeptic. Namely, nothing is said as to what specifically we are to know; only that we must know something and not nothing. Regardless, it is this parsimonious and incontrovertible premise which will ground the rest of Spinoza's metaphysical system, as well as the deduction of his rationalist method.

A True Idea: The PSR in Embryo

It makes little difference to assert that we must possess some knowledge of reality apart from a more specific determination of just what knowledge is. Fortunately, in the *Treatise*, Spinoza provides us with a clear, two-fold account of knowledge:

1) All knowledge is certain.

First, it pertains to knowledge that it is apodictic, or put otherwise; a necessary feature of any item of knowledge is that it involves certainty.¹³ Once again, Spinoza presents this as a non-controversial and even analytic claim. What divides proper knowledge from mere sensation or opinion is that we are wholly assured of what we purport to know. If we know an idea to be true then we must also *know that we know* the content of this idea.

In perhaps the most famous and widely repeated illustration from the *Treatise*, Spinoza considers the knowledge of a certain man, "Peter." Spinoza goes on to explain that, should we in fact have knowledge of this individual, then we most certainly must also know that we possess said knowledge: "Everyone can experience this, when he sees that he knows what Peter is, and also knows that he knows, and again, knows that he knows that he knows."¹⁴ Meanwhile, this relationship works in the other direction as well. If we are aware of possessing knowledge of Peter (in this self-reflective way), then we certainly, in the first place, have that knowledge to begin with. In Spinoza's own words: ". . . to know that I know, I must first know."¹⁵

2) All knowledge defines its object's reason for being.

The second and perhaps more revealing characteristic of knowledge is the specific manner in which it corresponds to its object in reality, that is, its *ideatum*. For Spinoza, a given item of knowledge can only count as a true idea if it properly corresponds to its object's reason for being. Of course, the mere fact that a true idea must, in some way, correspond to its object in reality is not considered a matter of dispute by Spinoza. Indeed, it is a claim widely distributed throughout his writings, from the *Treatise* through the *Ethics*. "A true idea must agree with its object."¹⁶ This point is then repeated in the second part of the *Ethics* as well: "For all ideas . . . agree entirely with their objects."¹⁷ To be sure, that the idea of a triangle must be of a three sided shape, and not a five sided shape, is precisely what makes it the idea of a triangle in the first place. The same would go for the idea of a book, a mind, or a horse. An idea is considered a *true* idea just in case it corresponds correctly to its *ideatum*.

Clearly, however, the more controversial aspect of this claim is not the mere correspondence of a true idea with its object, but that a true idea must correspond, specifically, to its object's *reason for being*. The basis for such a specific conception of truth can be found most explicitly stated in paragraphs 95 and 96 of the *Treatise*. It is in these pivotal sections where Spinoza reveals his conception of true ideas *as definitions*. Since knowledge, to be properly considered knowledge, must correspond to a thing in reality, then knowledge cannot include mere sense-perception, hallucinations, imaginations, and the like. Rather, all real knowledge must define a real thing. Hence "definition" is the basic building block of all knowledge. For only definition involves true correspondence of a thought to its object. As such, the concept of *truth* can only legitimately apply to definitions (as well as those more complex propositions which make use of defined things).

At first blush, Spinoza's claim here may appear to involve a non-sequitur. After all, there appear to be many instances of knowledge claims which involve reality correspondence that, nonetheless, are not themselves definitions. To take a somewhat trivial example, we may claim that we know that the chicken in front of us is white. We have certainly made a claim which depends upon a correspondence to a thing in reality, (the chicken actually being white) yet we have not defined anything. I believe Spinoza's response to this objection, however, would be that even this assertion of knowledge is really *parasitic* upon definitional knowledge if it is to have any meaning or import at all. After all, what is it to call something "white" if we have no knowledge at all about that which this whiteness is supposed to inhere? I suppose those in the empiricist tradition might claim that *all* we can ever know are a given thing's sensible properties and never its inmost definition. This, however, is itself far from a non-controversial position and would, in any case, be rejected by Early Modern rationalists such as Spinoza. For Spinoza, all knowledge is dependent upon definition, either directly or else mediately in the manner just described.

The pertinent question then becomes: What makes for a perfect definition? Spinoza's answer is clear: "To be called perfect, a definition will have to explain the

inmost essence of the thing, and to take care not to use certain *propria* in its place.”¹⁸ In other words, if true ideas correctly correspond to their objects in reality, then it is of consequence how accurately and completely such correspondence occurs. The only truly comprehensive correspondence of definition-to-object will involve a defining of what is the object’s essence. Furthermore, this essence is nothing other than the object’s very reason for being, or put otherwise, the object’s reason for existing as it does. All considerations of *propria*, Spinoza’s term for the properties or characteristics of an object, are wholly superfluous to the creation of a perfect definition, and thus of a perfectly true idea.

For example, the true definition of a horse, that is, the adequate idea of what it is to be a horse, cannot involve merely a description of the horse’s skin, hair, its odor, or its fleas. These are nothing more than accidental properties which do not truly define the horse and its reason for existing as it does. To define a horse by describing its fleas is only to assume the existence of the horse, and then to describe some subsequent effects of that existence (i.e. the attraction of parasitic insects). To truly define a horse properly, to have a genuinely true idea of a horse, one must describe not its *propria*, but the cause of its existence *as a horse*. For, as confirmed in the *Ethics*, “The knowledge of an effect [i.e. a given thing in reality] depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.”¹⁹

All of this may be difficult to grasp when speaking about something corporeal, such as a living animal. To make matters clearer, Spinoza offers a more analytic, geometric illustration of the same point.

If a circle, for example, is defined as a figure in which the lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal, no one fails to see that such a definition does not at all explain the essence of the circle, but only a property of it . . . If the thing is created, the definition, as we have said, will have to include the proximate cause. E.g., according to this law, a circle would have to be defined as follows: it is the figure that is described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other moveable. This definition clearly includes the proximate cause.²⁰

Once again, the proper definition of a circle cannot involve the equality of its radii. These, just like the fleas of a horse, merely presuppose the existence of the circle and then describe one consequent property which results from this existence. Instead, the proper definition of a circle (inasmuch as true definitions describe the essence or the very reason for the being of a thing) involves how the circle is caused to exist as it does. In this case, the explanation is by way of the action of an even simpler entity, a line, and the movement of one of its end points while the other is held stationary. In each case it is the *cause* which provides the true, definitive, and essential idea of a thing.

Thus far, the whole discussion of lines, circles, definitions, and causes may seem entirely trivial – especially when what we are ultimately after is an account of the whole universe, a proof that all of reality is of a single substance, and finally, that this substance is subject to the universal principle of sufficient reason. Nonetheless, the basic account of knowledge and true ideas, which was reconstructed above, is vital for this end goal. For it was established first that we must, indeed, have some knowledge of at least one thing in reality. In the aforementioned reconstruction it was delineated precisely *what* this knowledge must amount to, namely, apodictic knowledge of a thing’s essence, or in other words, certain knowledge of how at least one thing in reality comes to be what it is and exist as it does.

This is wholly significant. It amounts to something like the PSR *in embryo*. We may not yet be able to affirm any *universal* principle of the PSR. We may not yet be able to affirm that every single thing in the universe is subject to cause and effect, that all entities require some sufficient cause for their particular existence, and thus that all things in the universe are wholly intelligible. There may yet be mysteries in the world, miracles, voluntaristic deities, absurdities, and things which are not comprehensible. Nonetheless, what we have thus far secured is the truth that at least *one thing* in the world is known; and since it is known then it must also be *knowable*. This one thing must have an intelligible essence, and thus an intelligible reason or cause for its particular existence. This is what is meant by the “PSR in embryo.” There is at least one real thing which is subject to this principle of sufficient reason even though the rest of the universe may, hypothetically, escape it altogether.

Simplicity as the Intrinsic Guarantor of Truth

What is needed next is an analysis of how the truth presents itself within a given idea. Recall that Spinoza insists that there can be no method and no rule for discovering the truth prior to our having a certainly true idea. It is, rather, this certainly true idea which itself must point us towards the general criterion of truth. In other words, “. . . for the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea . . . For certainty and an objective essence [i.e. true idea] are the same thing.”²¹

This denial of the priority of method means that the proof of an idea’s veracity can’t be external to the idea itself. It is, in any case, impossible to step outside of our thoughts and ideas in order to see whether or not they correctly correspond to their respective objects in reality. The only option remaining for finding warrant for our ideas is to examine them “internally” as it were. “As for what constitutes the form of the true, it is certain that a true thought is distinguished from a false one not only by an extrinsic, but chiefly by an intrinsic denomination.”²² But what is it about true ideas which intrinsically allow them to present themselves *as certainly true*? The answer given in the *Treatise* is “simplicity;” it pertains to the nature of simple ideas, and only simple or simplified ideas, to present themselves as certainly true.

In many ways this is Spinoza's major inheritance from the philosophy of Descartes. To understand something means to comprehend it "clearly and distinctly." Confused ideas cannot rightly be said to be understood. "Certainty," we established above, is an intrinsic feature of a true idea. Yet we cannot claim certainty so long as part of a thing's essence is obscured from us and escapes our full comprehension. "For then, so long as the distinct is not distinguished from the confused, certainty, i.e., a true idea, is mixed up with what is not distinct."²³ Thus, since certainty is the same thing as having a true idea, and certainty requires full comprehension of a thing in reality, then to possess a true idea means nothing else than to know something in its entirety. If the thing in question is complex, then this means we must come to know each of its simple, constituent parts. We must simplify it. "For the more particular an idea is, the more distinct, and therefore the clearer it is."²⁴ In a word, what is required for guaranteed knowledge is thorough analysis.

To illustrate this point, one may imagine any number of common fictions. Centaurs, unicorns, and werewolves may all come to mind. Upon further reflection, what allows us to conceive of such fictitious monsters, and then to falsely imagine that these actually exist, is that they are all complex ideas. More specifically, they are all *chimeras* - false compositions of disparate and incompatible parts. We may rightly have some conception of a human being and also a separate conception of a horse; yet when these are illicitly combined the imagination can compose the false, complex idea of the Centaur. This is only possible because the constituent elements "human" and "horse" are, themselves, true ideas which correspond to a real thing. It is only that these true ideas are conceived confusedly and without sufficient clarity such that they can be illicitly combined in this manner. If these were distinctly and clearly conceived, then the mental composition could never come about.

Along these same lines, one could hazily imagine the "geometrical chimera" of a square circle. Yet, again, this is only possible because this false notion is complex and parasitic upon two simpler ideas. If one had a thoroughly distinct comprehension of the individual conceptions of "circle" and "square," then it would be entirely impossible to even imagine the absurd "square-circle" complex. For the definition of each term clearly precludes the other. In each case, falsehood is made possible by the complexity of a given idea. Complexity allows the mind to hold onto an indistinct notion without ever clearly comprehending it as a whole; promiscuously considering one aspect, then another, yet never fully uncovering its falsehood. It is the absence of clear and distinct comprehension of every simple, constituent part that allows for falsity and thus precludes certainty.

. . . all confusion results from the fact that the mind knows only in part a thing that is a whole, or composed of many things, and does not distinguish the known from the unknown (and besides, attends

at once, without making any distinction, to the many things that are contained in each thing). . . ²⁵

It is thus clear enough why certainty requires particular knowledge of every simple part of a given thing. However, the converse is less clear. Namely, why should having a detailed idea of a given thing's parts positively entail that this is a *true* idea? In other words, why is simplicity not only a *necessary* but also a *sufficient* guarantor of a given idea's truth? Could not we possess a perfectly simple idea (or perfectly detailed ideas of a complex thing's simple parts) which is nonetheless false and corresponds to nothing in reality at all?

Spinoza's answer is an unambiguous "No." It is, in fact, not possible to have perfectly simple yet false ideas. As such, simplicity is that unique, intrinsic sign of a given idea which attests to its own truth. In other words, simplicity is the internal, *sufficient* guarantor of an idea's correspondence to its *ideatum*. Yet it may rightly be asked: *Why* is Spinoza justified in making such a claim? His justification is actually presented within two short lines near the very middle of the *Treatise*. They read: ". . . if an idea is of some most simple thing, it can only be clear and distinct. For that thing will have to become known, not in part, but either as a whole or not at all."²⁶

As straightforward as this statement is, it is this essential proposition which demonstrates precisely *why* our simple ideas surely correspond to their objects in reality, and thus *why* simplicity is identical to certainty:

Remember that all knowledge is definitional and thus causal. To have an adequate idea of a thing, i.e. to know a thing's definition, is to know its cause - its reason for being. To have a perfectly simple idea is, therefore, to know a thing which is its own cause for existing or not existing. Now, the supposed object of a perfectly simple idea has to be known in and through itself alone; i.e. it must be self-caused. But this means that a perfectly simple thing which is false is somehow self-caused *not to exist*, that is, it must be a self-contradiction. However, it must be a very special kind of self-contradiction - one not derived from individually true elements (such as a square circle or a Centaur). Again, this is because it is perfectly simple and has no multiplicity of elements to begin with. The supposed object must be *irreducibly* self-contradictory and absurd. But in this extraordinary case, there is nothing in it which is at all intelligible. It cannot ever be conceived or represented to the mind as an idea in the first place. Yet an idea which, by its very nature, cannot present itself to the mind because of its own irreducible absurdity is no idea at all, and we certainly have no reason to fear it!²⁷ Consequently, we may freely attempt to conceive of any perfectly simple idea with all confidence and certainty that it will, in fact, be a true idea and correspond to its object in reality. (This, again, is totally apart from whether or not the object also actually exists in a spatio-temporal sense.)

To restate this more concisely: All perfectly simple ideas are, supposedly, of perfectly simple things in reality. All perfectly simple things in reality must be their

own cause for existing or not existing. If a thing is its own cause for not existing, then it is an *irreducible* self-contradiction, and thus a complete absurdity. We could never conceive of it, or form an idea of it. For simple things are either known “as a whole or not at all.”²⁸ Thus, all truly simple ideas which we *do* possess must be of actually extant things. They must, therefore, be certainly true ideas.

When we examine the possible range of all our ideas, both intrinsically (in terms of their simplicity) and extrinsically (in terms of their correspondence), we quickly come to realize the necessary and sufficient conditions for certainty. Namely, all complex ideas, i.e. those not broken down into their simple parts, fail to be certain – they remain only possibly true. For, as explained above, clarity and distinctness require that we know a thing completely, and therefore know it in all of its particularity. Simplicity is a *necessary* feature of certainty.

Moreover, as just demonstrated, simplicity is also a *sufficient* indicator of a certainly true idea. This is for the reason that all truly simple ideas will either correspond to their respective objects in reality, or they will not present themselves to the mind in the first place. Hence, once we *do* possess a simple idea, we immediately become certain of its veracity. Put in other words, simplicity is the way a certainly true idea presents itself as such.

	True	False
Simple	Certain	Impossible
Complex	Possible	Possible

Since, as per Section III, it is a feature of true ideas that they involve certainty and, as per Section II, we in-fact do possess at least one true idea; then it follows that we must at least possess the true idea of a perfectly simple thing in reality.

The PSR, Monism are Born

In the last two sections we have shown that a given true idea is like the PSR in embryo; it involves the certain knowledge of its object’s sufficient reason for

being. Second, this idea presents its own, intrinsic method for presenting itself *as true*. Now it will be demonstrated that this self-asserting, true idea is that which ultimately blossoms into a universal conception of monistic substance and a universal principle of sufficient reason. The certainly true idea, this PSR in embryo, finally matures into a fully comprehensive metaphysics.

The main conclusion thus far is that we must possess the true idea of a simple, and thus self-caused, thing in reality. Again, this fact is not derived from any abstract rule or principle, but only from the necessary admission that we must possess *some* knowledge of reality, along with a clear idea of what knowledge (i.e. a true idea) must actually amount to. Up to this point, the Straussian, the theist, the existentialist, and the Pyrrhonic skeptic may each still assert that *outside* of this certainly true idea and its intelligible, simple object, a whole host of non-rational, non-determined, and non-intelligible entities may exist.

Yet it is precisely the simplicity of our necessarily true idea which will ultimately preclude all of these absurdities. For, as we have said, it pertains to the objects of simple ideas to be self-caused. (Since all knowledge presents the causes of its respective object, if an object were not self-caused, then it could not be conceived in and through itself, i.e. simply.) Since this real object is self-caused, then it must be unconditioned and unlimited by anything other than itself to exist as it does. What's more, since the perfectly simple thing cannot be an irreducible self-contradiction (for then we would never have an idea of it in the first place), it certainly cannot limit *itself* from existing in any way. In short, this entity of which we have a perfectly simple and distinct idea must be both real and infinite. Furthermore, it must be infinite not only after its own kind, but *absolutely* infinite.

In short, what Spinoza defines in the *Ethics* as substance, "... what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing . . ." ²⁹ must ultimately be the very same entity that he defines as God, "... a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence." ³⁰ What mandates such an identity (between a substance which contains the idea of its own cause and infinite God) is nothing other than the causal nature of knowledge itself.

The obvious implication of this is that the one certainly true idea we possess must be of an infinite *and intelligible* object in reality. In this way, intelligibility does indeed mark the entirety of existence; for nothing exists outside of this simple, infinite substance. The whole universe is thus knowable, and not only this, but actually, implicitly *known* by all rational creatures. It is the very first thing we know. However, none of this is bluntly asserted by some abstract rule or transcendental assumption. Rather, intelligibility is a concrete feature of a specific entity of which we have a certainly true idea. Since we know this entity to be infinite, intelligibility *itself* expands, as well, to infinity. The common charges of circularity and begging the question so often levied against Spinoza thus fail.

Of course, it must be reiterated that this all hinges upon Spinoza's very strong conception of infinity as "absolute infinity" or "absolute totality." Ordinarily, people can imagine many "infinite" things all coexisting upon their own plains, (e.g., infinitely long sets of odd numbers alongside infinitely long sets of even numbers). However, Spinoza makes it clear that such common examples are not truly infinite in the fullest sense, but rather, involve a partial negation. They are merely infinite in a qualified manner – infinite "after their own kind."³¹ As such, the sort of infinity which applies to God can only be unqualified, absolute infinity, and it is for *this reason*, that the intelligibility of substance is something which fills all of existence.

The fundamental point here is that reason is something which inheres in an intelligible substance. It does not pre-exist it or determine it from the outside. Rather reason, causation, and intelligibility are part of the very fabric of a knowable substance. The intelligibility of such a substance mandates that it has, for itself, an intelligible and sufficient cause for its own existence. It therefore conditions, not only its own infinite existence, but also the finite existence of all other things which constitute its various modifications. For the infinitude of a self-causing substance mandates that, first, all things are in this one substance, and second, that all things are subject to this singular causation. In this way, firmly grounded in the knowledge of an actual, concrete thing in reality, we can finally reach the sound conclusion of deterministic monism, and positively preclude all things supernatural, absurd, uncaused, and irrational. For all things not only have as their sufficient cause infinite substance, but moreover, *this cause is itself rational and intelligible*. Its effects, or in other words its modifications, will likewise be determined to be what they are in a wholly rational and intelligible manner.

Comparison with the *Ethics*

The major contention of this article was that Spinoza's early work in the *Treatise* reveals the basis for the methodology also employed within the latter *Ethics*. Now that the proof from the *Treatise* has been reconstructed, all that is left is to compare this with the similarly "causal" proof as found in the *Ethics*.³² This is specifically to be found in the first, alternate demonstration of that proposition.

Here one will find, as in the *Treatise*, two basic elements. First, substance/God must be the cause of its own existence or nonexistence:

For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence . . . But a substance which was of another nature would have nothing in common with God . . . and therefore could neither give him existence nor take it away. 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 his nature itself.

Second, it is inconceivable that infinite substance (i.e. God) can cause its own nonexistence. In this way, we know that it is impossible for God not to exist:

That is, his nature would [have to] involve a contradiction. But it is absurd to affirm this of a Being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect. Therefore, there is no cause, or reason, either in God or outside God, which takes his existence away. And therefore, God necessarily exists, q.e.d.

Right away the consonance between the causal argument in the *Treatise* and the abovementioned proof from the *Ethics* reveal themselves. In both arguments, “knowledge as causation” is affirmed. To know an effect is nothing other than to have an adequate idea of its cause. Indeed, this is originally stated as early as E1a4, “The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.” Also in both arguments, substance is something which cannot be self-contradictory; consequently the one, infinite substance must exist.

Indeed, all of this suggests another, “second order” similarity between the *Treatise* and the *Ethics*. That is the fact that both arguments, indeed, are truly a priori. In the history of Spinoza scholarship it has occasionally been posited that the *Ethics* actually includes a hidden existential premise – the existence of at least one, modal thing – and that only this suppressed premise yields the desired conclusion of an infinite God’s actual existence. Perhaps the most influential proponent of such a reading is H.H. Joachim, and it is specifically his position which Don Garrett critiques:

Joachim claims that all four proofs are variations on a single theme: ‘once grant that anything is actual and you must admit that God necessarily is actual.’ He further claims that Spinoza’s argument, alone among formulations of the ontological argument, escapes Kant’s criticisms and is in fact valid.³³

It is in fact very odd that Joachim persists in calling the arguments “ontological” while attributing to them a missing premise to the effect that something or other exists . . . It is not at all surprising, on the other hand, that an essentially cosmological argument should be found to escape Kant’s criticism of ontological arguments.³⁴

It appears that while Joachim perceived a “hidden” existential premise in the *Ethics*, he admired the *Treatise* for being more upfront about its existential commitments, and thus for providing the real basis for the *Ethics*’ geometrical proofs, and especially the *definitions* upon which those proofs are built. In an incisive passage Aaron Garrett writes of this position:

Joachim conjectured ... that the TIE was the ultimate source of these first principles rather than the *Ethics* . . . As a consequence of this interpretation, Joachim – quite reasonably – saw the geometrical method as having two fundamental flaws. First, the geometrical form was ultimately inadequate to the content that Spinoza wished to explicate, since geometric presentation stays at an abstract level and never really attains a concrete form . . . The second, and closely related criticism was that the geometrical form presents itself as a synthetic deduction whereas it includes all sorts of analytic components.³⁵

Both Don Garrett and Aaron Garrett reject Joachim's conjecture in two ways. First, it is denied, I think rightly, that the *Ethics* needs some or another existential premise for its axioms and subsequent proofs to have any real import, that is, to have any traction with reality. Second, both rightly reject Joachim's claim that the *Treatise* is any more explicit about positing an existential premise than is the *Ethics*. Indeed, as I hope I have shown above, the *Treatise* does nothing of the sort. It is never claimed that we, first, have knowledge of some modal thing actually existing. It is rather claimed that we, simply, must have some knowledge. Spinoza, in the *Treatise*, employs a *reductio ad absurdum* form of argument against global skepticism, revealing it to be inherently self-defeating. Yet the argument is wholly conceptual and a priori, and does not assert that we know any *actual* thing, let alone any actual, modal thing. The knowledge which we must necessarily possess may, very well, be of a real thing which is *not* actually extant (again, such as the true knowledge of a perfect circle).

Importantly, however, the contemporary positions of Don Garrett and Aaron Garrett also reject the opposite wing of Spinoza interpretation. This is the tendency which interprets Spinoza's ontological proofs as *purely* formal and analytic. Well represented by Harry Wolfson and William Earle, such theorists tend to deny that the *Ethics* does anything more than to analyze those ideas and intuitions which already present themselves to us. Again, Don Garret writes:

On the Wolfson-Earle view, Spinoza is essentially reporting, rather than arguing, that we have or can have an experience of God's nature in which we rationally perceive His existence as necessitated by His essence . . . Wolfson argues, and Earle implies, that ontological arguments, properly understood, never do more than report, analyze, and elucidate such a rational perception.³⁶

As a consequence of this position, proponents of the Wolfson-Earle view are perhaps more likely to perceive a great difference between the "properly ontological" proofs of the *Ethics*, and the more synthetic, causally based arguments

of the *Treatise*. For the *Ethics*, they assert, does nothing more than elucidate nominal definitions, rather than attempting to first ground those definitions in actual things, ideas, and causes in the world.

Once again, though, the contemporary positions of both Don Garrett and Aaron Garrett reject such a reading of Spinoza's ontological argument as found in the *Ethics*. Rather, it is affirmed that Spinoza's ontological arguments in this mature work are not purely analytic and definitional (though they are a priori); rather they involve a robust notion of the principle of sufficient reason – a strong idea of causality which is not merely part of a nominal definition, but actually has real efficacy in the world. As Don Garrett explains:

Spinoza is best understood as offering four interrelated arguments which resemble ontological arguments in being essentially a priori and relying on a definition of 'God,' but which resemble cosmological arguments in depending on a version of the principle of sufficient reason.³⁷

Along very similar lines, Aaron Garrett expounds on what he sees as the telling difference between Spinoza's use of axioms and his use of definitions within the *Ethics*. He asserts that axioms do, indeed, represent analytic, definitional claims – most often referring to given relations between defined terms. However, crucially, those fundamental definitions *themselves* are not merely nominal or conventional. Indeed, definitions are real and substantive precisely because, as clearly outlined in the *Treatise*, they involve the real and sufficient causes for their respective objects. Thus Aaron Garrett writes on the distinction between axioms and definitions:

Why definitions and not axioms? In the TIE Spinoza emphasized that universal axioms (TIE 93) are incapable of determining us to the contemplation of one singular essence or another. Rather we need to discover definitions of singular things upon which the axioms can operate in order to form thoughts from some particular affirmative essence or from a true and legitimate definition. Only then will we be able to discuss particular things and their causes, and refer them back to the first cause. This does not mean that axioms are unimportant in comparison with definitions, they are extremely important, but ultimately they depend on definitions for any sort of 'traction' they have on actual things.³⁸

Once more, we see the contemporary interpretation of Aaron Garrett and Don Garrett revealing the basic consonance of the *Ethics*' methodology with the methodology of the *Treatise*. In both works, definitions are not merely nominal, but are determined by their place in the real, causal chain of sufficient reasons.

Conclusion

As perceptive as these above arguments indeed are, there is still a basic difficulty in completely reconciling the *Treatise* with the methodology of the *Ethics*. This becomes evident in Don Garrett's own reading of the principle of sufficient reason as found within the *Ethics*. Specifically, this comes in the third axiom of part one which reads: "From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow." Curiously, Don Garrett argues for a "liberal" or expansive reading of this axiom:

If we read Spinoza's term 'effect' liberally, as 'state of affairs,' Axiom III then claims that the full reason or explanation of a state of affairs must constitute a sufficient condition for it, and that no state of affairs can lack such a reason; in other words, that a sufficient reason can be given why everything should be as it is. This claim can fairly be called a principle of sufficient reason.³⁹

Don Garrett thus reads axiom three as claiming that *all things* have a sufficient cause for their particular existence. Of course, a literal or narrow reading of the axiom would say nothing more than, "For every cause there is an effect, and vice versa." In other words, it would be a simple, analytic claim about what it means to be called a "cause" and what it means to be called an "effect." Now is it unclear why Don Garrett insists upon such an expansive reading of E1a3, except for the stated reason that only such an expansive reading is sufficient for the ultimate conclusions of part 1 of the *Ethics*⁴⁰ (i.e., God's actual existence). Yet such a reading appears to run counter to everything that has been said thus far. As an axiom, this statement should not be adding anything synthetic to our body of accepted knowledge. It must rather only elucidate the necessary relations between *already* defined terms. (And it is these *definitions*, and only these definitions, which must introduce all real, non-analytic, or non-nominal pieces of knowledge.)

In fact, Don Garrett's apparent lapse in consistency at this particular juncture is very telling. It is exactly on this point, the affirmation of the PSR as such, which Spinoza's critics most often focus upon. To affirm the PSR axiomatically may indeed, as Garret states, be productive or even indispensable for the ultimate conclusion of an infinite God. The real universality of the PSR may even, to some individuals, be intuitively appealing. Nonetheless, if it is meant to be introduced at the level of an axiom (as opposed to a certainly true definition), then the critics of Spinoza are free to reject its reality, and consequently, to consistently reject the overall proof for substance monism.

Even Don Garrett *himself* accepts the validity, but rejects the soundness, of Spinoza's causal proof for God's existence! It is significant that the stated reason for

doing so is that he rejects Spinoza's very strong conception of the PSR. But then, this is the whole point – Don Garrett is perfectly free to do so. He is free to reject the strong conception of the PSR precisely because it is not, in fact, derived from real, secured definitions, but instead comes from an expansive reading of a given *axiom*.

If we accept Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason . . . we must accept the existence of a logically necessary being and the soundness of an ontological argument in some form. The same conclusion follows if we accept his principle of sufficient reason, the requirement that actual beings have actual causes, and the empirical existence of something or other. Spinoza and Kant would agree on these points, and so would I. I do not, however, believe in nearly such strong versions of Spinoza's principles, [i.e. of sufficient reason] partly because of these consequences. Thus, I think Spinoza's main line or argument is valid but not sound.⁴¹

Donn Garrett says it best in the first line of this excerpt: "If we accept Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason . . . we must accept the existence of a logically necessary being." Two features of this claim must immediately be pointed out. First, Garrett asserts that the real, universal efficacy of sufficient reason (that all things have a definite cause) is the premise from which God's existence is eventually deduced. Second, this is a *hypothetical* statement. Only *if* we accept this premise (i.e., the reality of Spinoza's robust PSR) then must we deduce God's logically necessary existence.

These two features reveal a basic dissimilarity between the ontological proofs of the *Ethics* and those found within the *Treatise*. As demonstrated above, the real universal efficacy of the PSR is never asserted axiomatically within the *Treatise*. It is, rather, derived from certainly true ideas (and definitions) about knowledge itself: (1) We must possess at least one item of knowledge. (2) All knowledge has some real thing as its ideatum. (3) Finally, the knowledge of a given thing involves knowledge of its essence, that is, *how a given thing comes to be what it is*. This definitional elucidation of what "knowledge" is (what can aptly be called Spinoza's rationalist essentialism), is what initially inserts sufficient reason into the realm of reality. (For we must have at least one true idea about at least one real object of knowledge.) Only *subsequently* can it be determined that a simple thing of which we must have true knowledge must be its own, unconditioned cause, and thus have the property of absolute infinitude. In short, the universality of the PSR does not *precede* infinite substance as an axiomatic rule. Rather, in the *Treatise*, the PSR is a *feature of* a necessarily known and defined thing, and it only becomes universal as this known, real thing intrinsically reveals *itself* to be infinite.

Yet because Don Garrett feels he must read the *Ethics*' E1a3 expansively, such a sure proof of the PSR's real efficacy is precluded. On Garrett's reading, the PSR as universally efficacious is merely asserted by Spinoza in the first several pages of the *Ethics*. It is not derived, step by step, from certainly true definitions of real objects. In fact though, I am largely sympathetic to Don Garrett's exegesis of axiom three. The overall argument of the *Ethics* does appear to require such a liberal and expansive reading. Though, as stated, such axiomatic assertions are always liable to charges of being only "hypothetically true" by skeptical critics such as Leo Strauss.

What is of lasting interest is that the *Ethics* does seem to contain within itself the resources for deducing a universal principle of sufficient reason *without* resorting to such axiomatic declarations. Indeed, these resources are strikingly similar to those found within the *Treatise*. We can specifically look at the aforementioned E1a4 which again states, "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause." As the *Treatise* shows, this causal conception of knowledge can yield, through some intermediate steps, a *universal* conception of sufficient reason. However, for this to work, two emendations must be made to the argumentative structure of the *Ethics* itself. First, and most obviously, axiom four which asserts the causal nature of knowledge must come prior to the claim of the universality of the PSR in the world. For the former is really the proper evidence of the latter. Yet in the *Ethics*, both are found "side by side" in the same set of axioms. Second, the causal nature of knowledge (E1a4) must *itself* be grounded in some certainly true definition.

This, at last, is the persisting virtue of the *Treatise*. For it is in the *Treatise* where the claim of "knowledge as causal" is deduced from the necessary definition of knowledge itself. That is, to truly know a thing is not to know its propria, but rather to know its essence, its definition, or in other words, how it comes to be what it is.⁴² Such a definitional analysis may be wholly consonant with the both the methodology and the ultimate conclusions of the *Ethics*. However, the actual procedure is best performed in the *Treatise* itself. Even readings rightly sympathetic to the overall similarity between these two works tend to reveal this fact.

References

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⁵ E2, 7.

⁶ E1, 11.

- ⁷ Garrett, D., “Spinoza’s ‘Ontological’ Argument”, *The Philosophical Review* 88 (1979): 198-223.
- ⁸ TIE, 29.
- ⁹ TIE, 38.
- ¹⁰ TIE, 35.
- ¹¹ TIE, 33.
- ¹² TIE, 47.
- ¹³ TIE, 108.
- ¹⁴ TIE, 34.
- ¹⁵ TIE, 34.
- ¹⁶ E1a6.
- ¹⁷ E2, 32.
- ¹⁸ TIE, 95.
- ¹⁹ E1a4.
- ²⁰ TIE, 95, 96.
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- ²² TIE, 69.
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- ²⁴ TIE, 98.
- ²⁵ TIE, 63.
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- ²⁹ E1d3.
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