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Metaphysics and Empowerment: Moore on the Place of Metaphysics in Spinoza's Philosophy

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One of the many attractive features of Adrian Moore's magisterial work, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, is its insistence that metaphysics at its best is a creative and even playful undertaking, a matter of attempting to make general sense of things in novel and unexpected ways. Responding to all sorts of philosophical pressures, metaphysicians create concepts that reorganize our theoretical practices, provide us with new critical standpoints, and directly or indirectly alter the way we live. At first glance, Moore's definition of metaphysics as 'the most general attempt to make sense of things' (p. 1) may seem suspect. Surely, one might think, theologians or theoretical physicists have as good a claim to be engaged on just such an attempt. But for Moore this is already a metaphysical question. What forms sense making can take, and whether they are really available to us, are among the issues that metaphysicians consider. Probing the first, they have asked whether our most general efforts at sense-making can only encompass immanent things or can also extend to transcendent ones (p. 9). Reflecting on the second, they have wondered whether our sense-making itself is transcendent. Do we stand outside the natural order and bring sense to it? Or does it make sense independently of us, as naturalists are inclined to believe (pp. 145-50)?

According to Moore, the creative efforts of modern metaphysicians have focused on these two strands of enquiry. But their investigations have not proceeded smoothly and their conclusions have not been cumulative. Since the early years of the seventeenth century, metaphysics has been punctuated by three revolutionary innovations, each of which Moore compares to a figure 'X'. Like the crossover point of its two lines, these innovations 'draw together the

various strands above it and issue in those below' (p. 107). One such moment is exemplified by the work of Descartes, whose status as the first modern philosopher derives from his novel claim that the way to make the most general sense of things is to reflect critically on his own heritage 'and to ask, using no other resources than are available to him from that position of critical reflection, what *entitles* him to draw on that heritage in the ways in which he does' (p. 27). The next 'extraordinary thing' that redirects metaphysical exploration is the transformation wrought by Kant, ensuring as it does that 'what has gone before and what will come after are both largely to be understood in terms of [his metaphysics]' (p. 107). A third equally momentous shift occurs when Deleuze takes 'philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular in all sorts of new directions' by 'releasing forces at work in his predecessors' (p. 542).¹

If, as this account implies, metaphysics periodically rewrites its own history, the fate and significance of any particular figure will always stand to be reassessed. Someone whose work has been seen as marginal under one dispensation may acquire a new centrality under the next, or *vice versa*. Among the figures whose fortunes have varied over time is Spinoza, who initially enters Moore's drama as a forthright though indebted critic of Descartes. Where Descartes separated the transcendent mind from the material body, Spinoza conceived human minds as immanent in God or nature. Where Descartes asked how the human mind can make sense of the physical world by accurately representing it, Spinoza saw human beings as parts of a physical world that already makes sense, and as participants in nature's sense-making. Where Descartes viewed metaphysics as a means to scientific understanding, Spinoza regarded it as an integral part of ethics, a kind of sense-making that we need to undertake if we are to become capable of living as well as human nature will allow. And where Descartes' good life revolved around the cautious avoidance of error, Spinoza's is an ethic of affirmation and empowerment.

¹ Moore would presumably agree that the radical implications of Deleuze's work have not yet been fully absorbed, and indeed, one of his aims may be help this process along.

After this opening scene, however, Spinoza disappears into the wings. He briefly reappears in order to be criticized by Fichte and Hegel,² but it is not until the plot turns to the non-analytic traditions of the late modern period that his role really picks up. The first hint of this change comes in Nietzsche's famous postcard: 'I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted. I have a *precursor*, and what a precursor! Not only is [Spinoza's] over-all tendency like mine – making knowledge the most powerful affect – but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself ...' (p. 397). Nietzsche's enthusiastic embrace is motivated by his commitment to a kind of metaphysics that shares many Spinozist features - an immanent and ethical undertaking in which there is no place for a personal God. But although he delightedly claims Spinoza as a precursor when writing to Overbeck, he does not acknowledge him in his published writings, so that in Moore's narrative it is only in the work of Deleuze that Spinoza steps into the limelight.

Deleuze explains his approach to the history of philosophy via a blatantly masculine sexual metaphor. 'I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous.' While the author is not entirely passive - he 'had to actually say all that I had him saying' - Deleuze's aim is nevertheless to produce something new and dissonant, the result of 'all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed' (p. 544). While Deleuze couples with many metaphysicians, the presiding geniuses of his own philosophical outlook are Spinoza, Nietzsche and Bergson. Taking account of the way Nietzsche reads Spinoza, and throwing in the Bergsonian distinction between the virtual and the actual, he constructs a Deleuzian tradition that begins with Spinoza and culminates in his distinctive philosophy. Like Spinoza, he rejects the transcendent (pp. 566-7); like Spinoza, he holds that making metaphysical sense of things is empowering; and like Spinoza, he takes it that empowering ourselves brings about an ethical transformation that is to some extent ineffable.

² On Moore's assessment of the philosophical relations between Spinoza and Hegel see the article by Robert Stern in this volume.

Looking back over Moore's book, we thus confront an overarching argument that runs from Spinoza, rather than from Descartes, to Deleuze. The Spinoza who first enters as a critic of Cartesianism becomes the progenitor of the most recent 'extraordinary thing' in the history of metaphysics. Spinoza's insights, shocking to many of his contemporaries and neglected by generations of his successors, eventually result in an innovative outlook that offers us a new way to make sense of things and at the same time alters what we can do. As our metaphysical understanding grows, we extend our capacity to live affirmatively. Opposing 'everything that takes pleasure in the powerlessness and distress of men, ... everything that breaks men's spirits' (p. 45), we become, as Deleuze puts it, 'more worthy of what happens to us' (p. 567).

For Moore, then, the most consequential feature of Spinoza's philosophy within the history of modern metaphysics turns out to be its claim that metaphysics can enable us to lead more affirmative and satisfying lives. The project of making the most general sense of things, as Spinoza conceives it, somehow enhances our practical capacity to avoid sadness and become more joyful and resilient. But how are these two things connected? What is metaphysics, in Spinoza's view, and how does it contribute to this ethical transformation? Moore handles these questions with characteristic learning and clarity; but I shall nevertheless suggest that his answers fail to do justice to Spinoza's rich account of the different ways in which we make sense, and the interconnections between them. Where Moore claims that Spinoza regards metaphysics as the fruit of reasoning, and thus as a species of what is labelled in the *Ethics* as knowledge of the second kind, I shall argue that metaphysics also belongs with what Spinoza calls imagining or knowledge of the first kind. And where Moore holds that, in order to render metaphysical knowledge practical, one must take a leap to a kind of knowledge that is partly ineffable (so-called knowledge of the third kind), I shall argue that each of the three kinds of knowledge, including metaphysics, is practically oriented.

Given the formidable scale of Moore's *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, these are minor suggested amendments, with which he may have

some sympathy (64-5). My aim is not so much to challenge his interpretation, as to explore how far a definition of metaphysics that is designed to apply to four hundred years' worth of philosophizing captures the character of metaphysics as Spinoza conceives of it.³ Moore's emphasis on metaphysics as a name for our attempts to make the most *general* sense of things certainly resonates within Spinoza's *Ethics*. However, so I shall argue, it fails to answer to Spinoza's view that our essence as human beings lies in our striving to persevere in our being, and to his insistence that this *conatus* is manifested in everything we do. In philosophizing – and so in doing metaphysics - we are striving to empower ourselves. To understand what makes metaphysics distinctive and valuable we therefore need to appreciate how it makes us more powerful, and what it contributes to the ethical transformation that philosophizing ultimately yields.

Where, then, does metaphysics fit into Spinoza's philosophical system? How does he conceive of our attempts to make the most general sense of things, and how does he think that these attempts empower us? Moore's reply focuses on Spinoza's claim that there are three kinds of knowledge. As Moore explains this view, we acquire knowledge of the first kind 'whenever something impinges on somebody from without, as for example when a man enjoys an ordinary sense perception or is given a piece of information by someone else' (58). Because knowledge of this kind does not lie within our own control but depends on the way that external things affect us, Spinoza describes the ideas it yields as inadequate. The information they give us about external things is partial and

³ In the *Ethics*, the term appears once, in the Appendix to Part I, where Spinoza refers to 'theologians and metaphysicians' who distinguish between an end of need and an end of assimilation (II/80). However, Spinoza also appends an *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts* to his reconstruction of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*. Here he says that the general part of metaphysics concerns being and its affections (I/233), and adds that angels are a subject for theology but not for metaphysics (I/275). Writing to Blyenbergh in 1665, he remarks that a proof of ethics 'must be founded on metaphysics' (IV/160) and that 'the necessity of things concerns metaphysics, the knowledge of which must always come first' (IV/161). References here are to Spinoza, *Opera* ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1924). Gebhardt's volume and page numbers are included in Edwin Curley ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). I have used Curley's translations throughout.

sometimes distorted. Knowledge of the first kind is duly contrasted with a second kind, reasoning, that escapes this form of dependence, because it consists in what Spinoza calls adequate ideas, which express their own reason for being true (EIIp.41). As Moore puts it, 'Just by carefully attending to one of our adequate ideas ... we can see it as true, because we can see it as explained by reasons which it itself expresses.' (59). It is important to Moore's argument that this sort of knowledge deals in generalities. Whereas knowledge of the first kind gives us, for example, inadequate ideas of particular bodies such as this star or that neighbour, knowledge of the second kind gives us adequate ideas of bodies in general. But this contrast in turn prompts the question of whether we can have adequate knowledge of particular things, and this is where knowledge of the third kind comes in. This sort of knowledge proceeds, in Spinoza's view, from an adequate idea of the attributes of substance to an adequate idea of the essences of [particular] things (EIIp40s2).⁴ Once again, it focuses on particulars rather than on types of things.

Since metaphysical enquiry is, by definition, our attempt to make the most general sense of things, Moore infers that metaphysics as Spinoza conceives of it must qualify as knowledge of the second kind. 'Metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things. In Spinoza's terms, it is the most general pursuit of knowledge of the second kind,' and must therefore map the relations between general ideas (64). There is evidently much that is right about this claim; Spinoza's *Ethics* offers us insights into the natural order of which we are a part. It purports, for example, to give us adequate ideas of substance and some of its attributes, from which all our other general ideas flow. However, it is not so clear that all our efforts to make the most general sense of things qualify as knowledge of the second kind. Since knowledge of the first kind also offers us general interpretations of things, there is at least a *prima facie* case for the view that metaphysics may not fall neatly into a single category but be spread, as it were, across two kinds of knowledge. To explore this possibility, and assess Moore's

⁴ References to the *Ethics* are given in the standard form.

claim, we therefore need to look in more detail at Spinoza's account of 'knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination' (EIIp40s2).

According to Spinoza, every human being has some physical power to move and some corresponding mental power to think; and each of us uses these powers, both to maintain ourselves as the beings we are and, where possible, to make ourselves more powerful and resilient (55). Furthermore, because our *conatus* or striving to persevere in our being is our essence, it is always in operation (EIIIp7). It is manifested, for example, in the workings of our bodies, in our actions, and in our thinking. Among the resources with which we strive to persevere in our being are, therefore, the ideas of the way that external things affect us that form the basis of knowledge of the first kind. When Jane sees an Alsatian dog, for example, she has an idea of a growling and frightening animal; but rather than merely receiving it, she strives with it. She affirms that there is indeed a frightening dog in front of her (EIIp17), and this idea in turn motivates her to act, perhaps by getting out of its way. Her idea of the dog therefore feeds into her efforts to persevere in her being and is reflected in her everyday attempt to make sense of the world.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza explores the ways in which imagination or knowledge of this first kind is, when judged by philosophical standards, epistemologically unreliable. It is grounded, he tells us, on sensory perceptions that have been represented to us in ways that are 'mutilated, confused and without order for the intellect' (EII p40s2). However, these ideas nevertheless form the basis of our everyday knowledge of the world and underlie our attempts to make general sense of it. As we strive to persevere in our being, we use the ideas that imagination delivers to form universal notions, arrive at inductive generalisations about the behaviour of types of things, and classify situations as more or less likely to be satisfying. To be sure, many of our judgments are relatively specific, as for example when we try to work out whether Alsatian dogs are usually dangerous; but we also press forward towards greater generality, formulating universal claims about what exists or what human beings can do. Insofar as we proceed in this fashion we remain in the realm of the inadequate

ideas that constitute knowledge of the first kind; but our enquiries nevertheless seem to constitute an attempt to make the most general sense of things, and thus seem to qualify, according to Moore's definition, as metaphysical. Why should we not conclude, then, that some metaphysics is knowledge of the first kind?

Spinoza himself is perfectly willing to accept this view. His objection to knowledge of the first kind is not that it fails to attempt to make the most general sense of things (and thus excludes the kinds of enquiries we classify as metaphysical), but rather that the metaphysics it produces is usually mistaken. Because knowledge of the first kind is unreliable, its flaws tend to be transmitted to the metaphysical outlooks that it yields, so that, like the ideas that go into them, they are inadequate, distorted or mutilated. However, in order to criticise the metaphysical fruits of imagining in these terms, we must first have understood the processes through which they have arisen and the epistemological limitations to which these processes are subject. While imagining itself can set us on this path (it is, after all, possible to imagine well or badly), it cannot in Spinoza's view guarantee that we will not continue to make the kinds of mistakes that we are setting out to criticise. Fortunately, knowledge of the second kind offers us a purportedly foolproof way of guaranteeing the truth of our ideas, including the metaphysical positions we have arrived at by way of imagining. It provides us with a means to make the most general sense of things that is also true, and a means to unmask ways of making the most general sense that fall short of this standard.

In the *Ethics* Spinoza aspires to reveal, from the standpoint of the second kind of knowledge, both how imagining works, and how it produces misleading metaphysical outlooks. Dwelling on the first issue, he identifies two major epistemological limitations of imagining, both fuelled by the working of our *conatus*. The first has its source in the ideas on which imagining rests. As we have seen, these are ideas of the way external things affect us, and in Spinoza's view they say more about our own bodies than the external things concerned (EIIp17c). But this is not how they strike us. Taking them to represent the external world as it is, we generate all sorts of misconceptions, some empirical,

others normative. Illustrating the empirical errors to which imagining exposes us, Spinoza notes that the sun appears to be quite near the earth. Moreover, unless some reason for doubt arises, an observer will affirm this idea and wrongly conclude that the perception is veridical (EIIp35s). Explaining how we go normatively astray, he focuses on our passions. Someone who is afraid of an Alsatian, for example, is liable to suppress the fact that their fear arises from the way the animal affects *them*, and view the dog itself as inherently frightening.

A second epistemological limitation of imagining stems from the way we use our everyday, inadequate ideas to persevere in our being. Sometimes these efforts are well-judged, as for example when we co-operate with other people to acquire useful skills. But our striving is also coloured by a disposition to imagine ourselves as powerful, and sometimes as more powerful than we are (EIIp12, p13). Interpreting the world in the light of our desires, we conceive of ourselves as the possessors of powers that we would like to have, or represent nature as we would like it to be. In our efforts to make sense, we blend reality with fiction and, letting our desires run ahead of us, imagine a world adapted to promote our ends (EIApp.).

According to Spinoza, these two imaginative dispositions are reflected in some of the most basic cognitive habits from which our metaphysical conclusions are derived, including our tendency to produce general definitions by comparing individual things. General terms are a central component of our attempts to make general sense of things; but while we think of ourselves as forming them by soberly investigating the properties of particulars, this is not the way we ordinarily go on. In many cases, our definitions are shaped by our desires and reflect our imagined ideals. They are, as Spinoza puts it, models or exemplars. However, instead of recognizing this fact, we take it that they accurately capture the way things are. For example, in forming a universal notion of a human being we compare individuals, focus on traits that we should like humans to possess,

treat these features as essential, and impose the resulting model on a less satisfying reality (EIVPref.).⁵

Spinoza discusses a number of cases where our attempts to do metaphysics go awry because the ideas to which they appeal reflect one or other of these distorting imaginative dispositions. A first example focuses directly on the way we construct general terms. As we have seen, Spinoza argues that our universal terms are prone to reflect our ideas of things as we would like them to be, and answer to our notions of perfection. For example, we might form a universal notion of a human being as the possessor of a whole range of perfections such as sight, rationality and virtue. But when we judge individuals against this standard (for example when we judge a blind man against such a model) we often find them lacking; and this in turn encourages us to arrive at what Spinoza regards as the profoundly mistaken view that there are imperfect individuals in nature.⁶ Moreover, once armed with the conviction that particular things have varying degrees of perfection, we are led into various metaphysical debates. Does God make imperfect individuals or not? Does he or does he not have the power to do otherwise? Does he or does he not condemn us to sin? Failing to appreciate that the universal notion of a human being on which these discussions rest is a mere 'notion of thinking' for which we ourselves are responsible, we struggle to make sense of the relationship between God and humanity.⁷

A comparable story can be told about a second of our metaphysical misconceptions, this time the belief that we have free will. Although we know very little about the causes of our actions, Spinoza argues, our disposition to conceive ourselves as more powerful than we are inclines us to locate these causes in ourselves, and to endow ourselves with a two-way power to act or refrain from acting. Taking at face value our phenomenological sense that

⁵ A. Wolf ed., *The Correspondence of Spinoza* (London: Frank Cass, 1966). Letter 19 to Blyenbergh 1665.

⁶ Wolf ed. *Correspondence of Spinoza*, Letter 19 to Blyenbergh 1665.

⁷ Wolf ed. *Correspondence of Spinoza*, Letters 19 and 20 to Blyenbergh 1665.

whether or not we act is up to us, and turning our face against the possibility that other causal factors may be involved, we portray ourselves as the natural possessors of a level of autonomy that is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve (EIIIp2s(ii); EIIp35s). Once again, an idea that has its roots in imagination has a deleterious effect on our attempts to do metaphysics, this time by encouraging us to suppose that, by virtue of free will, we stand apart from the rest of nature, and thus that making sense of ourselves will be a separate project from making sense of other kinds of thing.

A last example of imaginative metaphysics focuses on our ideas of God. As we have seen, the operations of our *conatus* sometimes prompt us to project our desire to be powerful, and in Spinoza's view this mechanism is at work when we form anthropomorphic ideas of the deity. (As he wryly remarks in a letter to Boxel, this disposition runs deep; if a triangle could talk, it would say that God is triangular.)⁸ At one level, images of a quasi-human deity arise from our desire to empower ourselves by understanding the world, and in particular by grasping the nature of its first cause. At another level, we make our images of the deity answer to our desire to be cared for by imagining a God who is loving and benevolent. At yet another level, we attempt to satisfy our yearning for a security that human politics cannot fully provide, by representing God as the author of a law that binds everyone and endows us all with certain rights and duties. Moreover, because these are the conceptions of God with which we try to make the most general sense of things, they shape – and limit – metaphysics (EIApp.).

As these three cases attest, the inadequacy of our ideas does not stop us from doing metaphysics. Working with whatever ideas they have, people form universal notions and use them to make the most general sense of things that they can. Moreover, because they usually have very little knowledge of the second kind and live mainly within the confines of imagination, most of the metaphysics that has so far been produced is knowledge of the first kind. As the *Ethics* sets out to show, it suffers from the epistemological limitations to which

⁸ Wolf ed., *Correspondence of Spinoza*, Letter 56 to Boxel, 1674.

imagining makes us vulnerable, and the claims it advances are either partly or comprehensively mistaken. (In Spinoza's view there are no imperfect individuals in nature; we do not have free will; and there is no anthropomorphic God.) However, unsatisfactory as they may be, these claims are nonetheless metaphysical ones, a series of flawed attempts to make the most general sense of things.

Since Moore intends his definition of metaphysics to 'cover as much as possible of what self-styled metaphysicians have been up to' (6), I suspect that he will agree with this conclusion, while pointing out that this is not how Spinoza sees his *own* metaphysics. Unlike the work of his predecessors, so Spinoza believes, his metaphysics has the advantage of being free from imaginative projection and distortion and, as the *Ethics* is meant to demonstrate, guarantees its own truth. Being knowledge of the second kind, arrived at by the process that Spinoza describes as reasoning, it is epistemologically superior to its competitors. But is it also more *general* than the metaphysical outlooks it is intended to surpass? Does Spinoza think of his own metaphysics not only as making *truer* sense than the systems developed by earlier philosophers, but also as making more *general* sense than they do? There is inevitably something less than completely general about the ideas that form the basis of knowledge of the first kind. Jane's ideas of Alsations, for example, are ideas of the way in which particular dogs have affected her particular body, and when she uses these ideas to form a universal notion of an Alsatian it will reflect the limits of her experience (58-9). Because it is grounded on partial evidence, this idea will be incomplete and perhaps to some degree distorted; and the same applies to any notions formed in this way with which we go on to do metaphysics. The great advantage of knowledge of the second kind, as Spinoza portrays it, is that it offers a way to overcome the particularity of our individual or collective experience. By starting from common notions or true ideas that are in principle accessible to everyone, and proceeding to the ideas that they express or are expressed by, we can arrive at an understanding of a comprehensive framework of necessary truths (61). In place of the experientially based ideas that imagination affords us, we can

formulate general terms that are genuinely universal and reflect the essences of things.

Knowledge of the second kind therefore yields conclusions of a scope or generality that imagining cannot provide; but there is also a further sense in which the kind of sense it enables us to make is maximally general. The truths that Spinoza claims to reveal through reasoning abolish a range of categorical distinctions such as those between God and nature, nature and man, or mind and body, and override the suggestion, routinely endorsed by other metaphysicians, that we might need to make sense of these things in different ways. As Moore points out, the *Ethics* proposes that we can make sense of everything, including ourselves and our sense-making, in one way REF. So in this respect, too, knowledge of the second kind offers us a form of understanding that is completely comprehensive or completely general.

Moore is therefore surely right that Spinoza regards himself as having identified a second kind of knowledge that enables us to make sense of things in a fashion more general than any conceived by his predecessors, and presents his own metaphysical conclusions as instances of knowledge of this kind. However, before we close with this judgment, we need to pause to consider whether knowledge of the second kind may not continue to rely on the workings of imagination. Perhaps, despite the power he attributes to reasoning, Spinoza's metaphysics remains a little imaginary, and therefore straddles the boundary between the first and second kinds of knowledge.

We get a first hint of how this might be so from the *Tractatus Theologico-Philosophicus*, where Spinoza implicitly discusses the relation between two ways of gaining knowledge that early modern philosophers describe as analysis and synthesis. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza's method is broadly synthetic; he states some premises and shows what follows from them. In the *Tractatus*, by contrast, he considers how we arrive at the premises from which reasoning proceeds, and allows that we often get to them by generalizing from experience. This, for example, is one way to formulate general definitions, such as those of motion and

rest (TTP II/102).⁹ As this example reminds us, knowledge of the first kind is not invariably subject to the distorting flaws we have discussed, and when used with caution can produce ideas that are taken up into knowledge of the second kind. Imagining and reasoning work hand in hand, the first supplying materials for the second, and together contributing to our efforts to make the most general sense of things.

Perhaps Moore will reply that ideas only becomes general enough to be counted as metaphysical when they have been vindicated by reasoning. For example, a definition of motion, however arrived at, only becomes integral to Spinoza's metaphysical attempt to make the most general sense of things once it has been shown to express and be expressed by other adequate ideas, and thus to be adequate itself. I agree with Moore that Spinoza imagines a comprehensive philosophical system that answers to this description, and aspires to outline some of it in the *Ethics*, where many of the key ideas on which he relies are purportedly adequate and constitute knowledge of the second kind. However, we need to remember that very few of our ideas are completely adequate, and that adequacy comes in degrees. For example, a student of geometry starts out with an inadequate idea of a triangle, which becomes more adequate as she understands more of its properties. Spinoza himself does not have an entirely adequate idea of God, although he does have adequate ideas of some divine attributes, thought and extension.¹⁰ We have only a hazy or inadequate idea of the human body: 'We do not know what the body can do' (EIIIp25; EIIp29s). Furthermore, since body and mind are in Spinoza's view one and the same thing, our idea of the human mind will be correspondingly inadequate (EIIp21).

Should a philosopher respond to this state of affairs by theorizing only with completely adequate ideas and refusing to have anything to do with the rest? Ideally, yes. But Spinoza acknowledges the impracticality of such an approach

⁹ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* ed. M. Silverthorne and J. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). The reference is to Gebhardt's volume and page number, which are included in Silverthorne and Israel's edition.

¹⁰ Wolf ed., *Correspondence of Spinoza*, Letter 56 to Boxel 1674.

and allows that, in order to pursue the project of making the most general sense of things, we must be willing to work with ideas that are only partly adequate, and must therefore move back and forth across the border between the first and second kinds of knowledge.

Consider, for example, Spinoza's claim that figure is not an intrinsic feature of a body, but simply a way of describing the way one body limits another. 'For he who says that he apprehends a figure wants to express thereby nothing else than that he is apprehending a limited thing, and how it is limited. The limitation, therefore, does not belong to the thing in virtue of its being'.¹¹ This being so, one might expect Spinoza to avoid any appeal to the figures of bodies in the course of the *Ethics*; but in fact he takes another course. The study of geometrical figures provides the exemplary case of knowledge of the second kind. Furthermore, Spinoza's discussion of physical principles in Part II of the *Ethics* includes a description of the way that bodies of different sizes 'lie upon one another' (EIIA2"Dftn.). Here Spinoza seems to acknowledge that a partly inadequate idea of a body has a role to play in the construction of a comprehensive philosophical account of nature. Rather than censoring our disposition to imagine bodies as possessing figures, we shall do better – at least for the time being – to make cautious use of it as we develop an increasingly adequate knowledge of bodies and their behavior.

Spinoza also takes a comparable approach to the notions of good and evil. We form these notions, he explains, by comparing one thing with another, and although we often take good and evil to be intrinsic properties of objects or states of affairs, they do not in fact indicate anything positive in things themselves. They are merely modes of thinking or inadequate ideas that arise from our own imaginings (EIVPref.). Since they are inadequate, Spinoza should ideally refrain from using them in philosophical contexts; but again, his strategy is not so straightforward. 'Because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature that we may look to', it will be 'useful for us to retain these words'. It will

¹¹ Wolf ed., *Correspondence of Spinoza*, Letter 50 to Jelles 1674.

be useful, that is, to imagine a human being who has all the traits we regard as good, and to describe anything that enables us to become more like this model as good in itself. For example, if co-operating with other people helps us to achieve this end, we are justified in describing it as good in itself, despite the fact that, since goodness is not an intrinsic property of co-operation, a certain amount of ontological distortion is involved.

Cases such as these suggest that, as we strive to develop a maximally general type of understanding, we are simultaneously tethered and empowered by our disposition to imagine things in ways that do not fully reflect what they are. Insofar as this habit prevents us from confronting things in themselves it holds us back. But it can also be metaphysically constructive. In the *Ethics* Spinoza imagines an entirely general and comprehensive way of making sense of things, a complete metaphysical system from which nothing escapes. But his grasp of this system is partial or inadequate, and many of its aspects are more glimpsed than known. Moreover, in working it out, he relies on further ideas that are less than fully adequate, and that therefore have at least a foot in knowledge of the first kind. Sometimes this device is a concession to his readers, who are given permission to rely on inadequate ideas to help their thinking along. ('If you cannot manage to conceive of God without thinking of him as possessing a will, then go ahead. Do not let this prevent you from developing as adequate an idea of him as you can.'¹²) But elsewhere Spinoza gives the same permission to himself. He allows himself, for example, to work with an idea of body that is only partly, or perhaps intermittently, adequate; and he allows himself to work with an imagined conception of intrinsic good. Above all, he allows himself to work with an inadequate idea of metaphysics as an undertaking that falls entirely within the scope of the second kind of knowledge.

If these suggestions are right, Moore's claim that Spinoza regards metaphysics as a species of knowledge of the second kind can be said to reflect Spinoza's aspirations. Ideally, metaphysics should be a way of making sense of

¹² See for example Wolf ed., *Correspondence of Spinoza*, Letter 20 to Blyenbergh 1665.

things that, being both comprehensive and true, has no use for the situated and to some extent provisional insights that knowledge of the first kind delivers. Like Spinoza himself, however, Moore underemphasizes the extent to which metaphysical enquiry relies on imagination, both for a model of metaphysics that we can aspire to realize, and for ideas that, despite the fact that they are less than adequate, serve to keep our understanding on the move.¹³

By defining metaphysics as an attempt to make the most general sense of things, and interpreting Spinoza with this definition in mind, Moore draws our attention to the sense in which the second kind of knowledge is more general than knowledge of the first kind. As we have seen, this is certainly one of Spinoza's preoccupations, and Moore's approach does ample justice to this aspect of his philosophy. But there is also something else that this interpretation marginalizes. As well as arguing that the second kind of knowledge is more general than the first, Spinoza takes it to be more empowering. Making the most general sense of things is a condition of becoming able to live joyfully and resiliently, and it is this feature that makes the second (and indeed the first) kind of knowledge so desirable. Metaphysical understanding is not valuable in itself, nor is not valuable simply because it is general. Rather, its value derives from its role in the transformative process of learning to lead a truly ethical life. So how does metaphysics empower us? How does it answer to our striving to become more powerful than we are?

As Moore presents the matter, metaphysical knowledge is theoretical. Whereas imagining yields the practical knowledge with which we negotiate the world, and thus empowers us in many crucial ways, knowledge of the second kind stands back from action. It shows us how one adequate idea of a general type of thing expresses other such ideas, as in a mathematical proof, and in doing so overturns many of our imaginatively-grounded prejudices. It convinces us of the truth of our adequate ideas, thus strengthening our commitment to a certain metaphysical outlook. But it does not show us how to put this outlook into

¹³ Though Moore acknowledges the difficulties inherent in Spinoza's project (64).

practice, and thus how to generate the ethical way of life that Spinoza regards as the pinnacle of human power. In order to take this further step we have to acquire knowledge of the third kind, which proceeds, as the *Ethics* puts it, from an adequate idea of the attributes of substance to an adequate idea of the essences of things (EIIp40s). As Moore explains, grasping the essence of a thing, X, is partly a matter of grasping what it can do, and is thus a matter of knowing 'how to exploit the possibilities that X affords, if ever and whenever the opportunity arises' (63). When X is oneself, knowledge of the third kind encompasses knowledge of how to do what one can do, and when X is something else, it encompasses knowledge of how to do what one can do in co-operation with X. In Moore's view, the transition from the second to the third kind of knowledge involves a leap from the general to the particular, and from the theoretical to the practical, which cannot be wholly expressed in words (65). The hierarchy of the three kinds of knowledge therefore moves from the practical to the theoretical and back to the practical again. Metaphysics stands between two ways of making sense that clearly manifest our striving to become more powerful than we are; but we are left wondering how metaphysics itself expresses our *conatus*.

Here, I think, Moore draws too clear a line between theoretical and practical kinds of knowledge. Lucid as his analysis is, it overlooks an important sense in which metaphysics also has what can fairly be described as a practical orientation, and contributes to our empowerment by extending what we can do. In order to see this, we need to focus once again on the character of the general terms that constitute knowledge of the second kind. When we reason, we learn to see how one idea is the expression of others, and how it in turn expresses still further ideas. Furthermore, if reasoning is to be fruitful, the ideas that we investigate must be rich in what Spinoza calls causes and effects; they must express and be expressed by many ideas, so that the process of reasoning does not get bogged down but can move steadily forward. Writing to Tschirnhaus (after he had completed the *Ethics*), Spinoza explains that the fecundity of an idea depends on the way it is defined. 'In order that I may know from which idea of a thing, out of many, all the properties of the object may be deduced, I observe one

thing only, that the idea or definition of the thing should express its efficient cause. For example, in order to investigate the properties of a circle, I ask whether from this idea of a circle, namely that it is composed of innumerable right angles, I can deduce all its properties ... Since this is not so, I seek another, namely that a circle is the space which is described by a line of which one point is fixed, the other moveable. Since this definition expresses the efficient cause, I know that I can deduce from it all the properties of a circle, etc.’¹⁴ The type of definition that Spinoza recommends tells us how a thing is brought about, and in this case how a circle is constructed. The definition is theoretically fecund in the sense that it enables us to map sequences of efficient causes and effects, but it is also practically relevant. It tells us how to do something, namely how to draw circles. To have an adequate idea of a circle is therefore, among other things, to know how to form one.

If metaphysics is knowledge of the second kind and conforms to this pattern, the ideas in which it deals have a practical slant. They are general ideas of types of things rather than ideas of particulars; but they are also ideas of how to bring things of a certain type about. Needless to say, many of the causes and effects that Spinoza traces in the *Ethics* lie far beyond human power; but we nevertheless understand them by coming to see how they are produced by things that are much more powerful than we are. In some cases, moreover, seeing how one adequate idea expresses another is simultaneously a matter of seeing how we ourselves can bring about events of a certain type, as in the case of the circle. Knowledge of the second kind therefore illuminates a realm of activity to which our own activity belongs. As we acquire it, we see how the things that we are capable of bringing about fit into a broader pattern of action, and our grasp of this pattern in turn informs our understanding of what we ourselves can do.

Spinoza’s second kind of knowledge is therefore general, as Moore emphasizes, but also practical in its orientation. Furthermore, this way of viewing it helps us to see how, like our attempts to gain knowledge of the first and third

¹⁴ Wolf ed., *Correspondence of Spinoza*, Letter 60 to Tschirnhaus, 1675.

kinds, our efforts to make sense of things by acquiring adequate ideas manifest our *conatus*. When we reason we strive to empower ourselves by understanding how things are brought about, and more specifically how we can bring things about. Taking advantage of the epistemological clarity that this kind of thinking brings, we affirm what we can do. The crucial things about metaphysics is therefore that, by empowering us in this way, it moves us in the direction of the affirmative way of life that is our greatest ethical achievement.