

Reason in the Short Treatise

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Introduction

Spinoza's view of the human mind changes significantly between the *Short Treatise* (hereafter: KV) and the *Ethics* (hereafter: E). Perhaps the two most striking changes (or, at least, apparent changes) concern mind-body causal interaction and the passivity of the intellect, both of which he seems to accept in KV but reject in E.¹

My topic is another, less discussed change: a shift in Spinoza's account of reason, the second-highest kind of knowledge. The change is easy to overlook but, I think, quite far-reaching. Understanding this shift provides insight into the Spinoza's mature view of reason. I begin by detailing the shift in Spinoza's view, and then attempt to understand why he changes his mind.

Three caveats. First: I don't have space here to discuss the view of reason in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, though I note a few relevant points. Second: I talk as though there is a single view of reason in the main text of KV (treating the marginal notes more cautiously). This is a substantive assumption, but little of what I have to say heavily relies on it. As much as possible, I make use of passages from KV that either occupy a central place in the work or involve claims that Spinoza makes more than once. The KV is a difficult work, and far from perfectly consistent, but Spinoza's claims about reason hold together enough, I believe, that we can find a coherent view there.² Third: those

¹ On mind-body causation in KV: Book 2, Chapter 19. On the passivity of the intellect in KV: KV 2/15, G I/79. For discussion of the latter topic, see Wolf, "Introduction," Mignini, "Spinoza's theory on the active and passive nature of knowledge" and Ursula Renz's paper in this volume.

² Curley states that Spinoza's description of reason in KV is "too vague to be of use to anyone" (Curley, "Experience in Spinoza's theory of knowledge," 40). In the same paper, Curley (following Joaquim, *Spinoza's tractatus de intellectus emendatio*) argues that the doctrine of reason in TIE is confused, and changes by the time of the *Ethics* (but see Carr, "Spinoza's Distinction Between Rational and Intuitive Knowledge"). The

commentators who have considered the view of reason in KV have predominantly been concerned with whether Spinoza took reason to be a faculty for *general* or *inferential* representation. What I say below has implications for this issue, but I think that is not where we should focus if we want to understand Spinoza's conception of reason in KV.

Reden and ratio

It makes sense to talk of a change in Spinoza's view of reason only if there is some core notion of reason that is maintained through both works. Though they are both translated as 'reason,' there is room to wonder whether KV's talk of *reden* is meant to get at the same notion as E's talk of *ratio*. Fortunately, the way Spinoza uses example of the 'rule of three' in both works shows that '*reden*' and '*ratio*' refer to the same thing.³

The example centers on how one would solve for x in equations of the form $A/B = C/x$. Spinoza considers different ways someone might find the solution by using the rule: multiply B and C, and then dividing the result by A. In KV, he describes someone who,

being satisfied neither with report, because it can deceive, nor with the experience of some particular [cases], because it cannot be a rule, consults true reason, which has never, when properly used, been deceptive. Reason tells him that because of the property of proportionality in these numbers, this is so, and could not have been, or happened otherwise. (KV 2/1, G I/55)⁴

Spinoza contrasts this with people who would reach the same result on the basis of report, on the basis of casual experience or (at the other end of the spectrum), on the basis of the highest form knowledge.

In E, we get the same contrasts, though Spinoza gives a briefer description of reason. In E2p40s2, he states that we can realize the correctness of the rule "from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things... This I shall call

principal change Curley argues for is different from the one I identify below, though my conclusion is consistent with his.

³ Curley questions whether the mathematical example accurately conveys Spinoza's views (Curley, "Experience in Spinoza's theory of knowledge," 29ff.). His concerns do not bear on the issue of continuity, though.

⁴ Spinoza does not seem to think of reason merely as inference: "We call the second belief, because the things we grasp only through reason, we do not see, but know only through a conviction in the intellect that it must be so and not otherwise" (KV 2/2, G I/55). Curley questions whether the example really displays Spinoza's views about the objects of knowledge (Curley, "Experience in Spinoza's theory of knowledge," 29), but his concerns do not affect the point I'm making here.

reason and the second kind of knowledge” (see also E 5p7d). Spinoza goes on to claim that the second kind of knowledge can never deceive.

If, as is plausible, we think that this example illustrates Spinoza’s basic division of the cognitive faculties, then there is good reason to think that *reden* = *ratio*, and that if Spinoza affirms anything of *reden* in KV that he denies of *ratio* in E (or vice-versa), then this amounts to a change of view.⁵

A terminological note: In KV, Spinoza sometimes refers to reason, or the deliverances of reason, as ‘belief’ (e.g. KV 2/2, G 1/55) or as ‘true belief’ (e.g. KV 2/1, G 1/54). Below, I make use of some passages that use these terms for reason, but only when the context makes it clear that this is justified. Similarly, Spinoza uses a variety of terms for the kind of knowledge above reason (*scientia intuitiva* in E), but I will refer to it simply as ‘highest knowledge.’

Four differences between the KV’s and E’s account of reason

There are four *prima facie* significant points of difference between KV and E on reason. It is plausible that these points are interrelated, though it is not immediately obvious how.

(a) Reason and clarity and distinctness

As we saw, in E, Spinoza defines reason as cognition from common notions. Since common notions are “adequate or clear and distinct” (E2p38c⁶), adequacy is equivalent to clarity and distinctness, and whatever follows from an adequate idea is also adequate (E2p40), it follows that all cognition through reason is clear and distinct.⁷

However, there are strong indications that in KV Spinoza thinks that only the highest kind of knowledge is clear and distinct. In KV 2/1, Spinoza claims that cognition from reason is *more* clear than that of cognition from hearsay or random experience, but less clear than

⁵The example also appears in the *Treatise*: TIE 23-25, G II/11-12.

⁶Note also how Spinoza moves freely between ‘adequate’ and ‘clear and distinct’ in E2p28D, E3p9D, E3p58D, E5pP4D.

⁷Spinoza effectively states this in E5p28d. E4p26d and E5p12d even seem to suggest that all things that are clearly and distinctly understood are on the basis of reason, though E5p20s shows that is not Spinoza’s view.

highest knowledge. Following Descartes, Spinoza appears to think that if an idea is clear and distinct, nothing can be more clear or more distinct than it (though ideas that are not clear and distinct can come in degrees of clarity and distinctness).⁸

The closest Spinoza comes to a statement that reason involves clarity and distinctness is his claim at I/60 that true belief (and so reason) “brings us to a clear understanding [*ons brengt tot een klaar verstand*]”. But this claim seems best understood as a statement of his view that reasoning leads to use of highest knowledge. As he says at KV 2/26, G I/109, “reasoning is not the principal thing in us, but only like a stairway, by which we can climb up to the desired place.”⁹

This is reinforced by Spinoza’s descriptions of the highest kind of knowledge. In KV 2/2, he describes the highest kind, in contrast to reason, as knowledge “through a clear and distinct concept” (*klare en onderscheide bevatting*). In the same chapter, Spinoza reserves the title “clear knowledge” (*klaare kennis*) for the type of knowledge that is higher than what reason provides. He does the same in KV 2/21 with a contrast between reasoning and “clear understanding” (*redenering vs. klaar verstand*). So in the KV, clarity and distinctness is a feature of only highest knowledge, whose “sole property is to understand everything clearly and distinctly at all times” (KV 1/9, G I/48).¹⁰

(b) Reason and what is outside us

In KV, Spinoza states in a number of places that reason presents its objects as “outside us.” In KV 2/4, Spinoza refers back to the example of the rule of three, stating that someone who arrives merely at true belief about the answer (i.e. reaches the answer via

⁸ Spinoza is clear on this facet of Descartes’ terminology in his work on Descartes’ *Principles*. Cf. CM 1p15s, G I/173-175.

⁹ In a marginal note to KV 1/7 (G I/44), Spinoza does talk of being convinced that God’s attributes are substances by ‘clear and distinct reason’ (*klare en onderscheidelyke reeden*). If my proposal is correct, this is evidence that the marginal note indicates Spinoza’s more developed view.

¹⁰ One reason this may have been overlooked is that Spinoza elsewhere closely aligns clarity and distinctness with truth (e.g. E 1p8s), and in the KV he does think that the deliverances of reason are always true. But in KV, Spinoza does not claim or imply that truth entails clarity and distinctness. In the *Treatise*, Spinoza is fairly clear that reason’s knowledge is not adequate (TIE 19, G I/10), a point noted by Curley (Curley “Experience in Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge”) and others. Contra Carr (Carr, “Spinoza’s Distinction Between Rational and Intuitive Knowledge”), this is not undermined by Spinoza’s claims that reason never leads to error. Cf. the second note to TIE 21, where Spinoza states that although a conclusion of reason “is certain, it is still not sufficiently safe” from confusions by the imagination (G II/11). Note that TIE 21 also claims that with reason, we “clearly infer” the conclusion (G II/11).

reason)

can discover through proportionality a fourth number that agrees with the third as the second does with the first... he can say that the four numbers must be proportional; but if this is so, then he speaks about it just as of a thing that is outside him. But if he comes to see the proportionality [i.e. with highest knowledge], as we have shown in the fourth example... then it is in him, not outside him. (KV 2/4, G I/59)

In a marginal note to that chapter, Spinoza states (now using 'belief' instead of 'true belief'):

Belief is a strong proof based on reasons, by which I am convinced in my intellect that the thing truly is, outside my intellect, such as I am convinced in my intellect that it is... I say... outside, because it makes us enjoy intellectually, not what is in us, but what is outside us. (KV 2/4, G I/59, echoed in the third paragraph of the main text)¹¹

As I discuss in the next section, this sort of claim appears again in his discussions of reason's limited control over the passions. For instance: "what we enjoy in ourselves cannot be conquered by what we do not enjoy and what is outside us, as what Reason shows us is" (KV 2/21, G I/100).¹²

There is no similar talk of the objects of reason being outside us in E. By contrast, Spinoza is quite explicit in E that these common things are "equally in the part and in the whole" (E2p38). There is never any suggestion of externality. After all, Spinoza points to common notions to justify the claim that we can form clear and distinct concepts of all affections of our own bodies (E5p4d).

(c) Reason's power over the passions

Despite giving reason the primary role in confronting lust in the first dialogue in KV (G I/28-30), Spinoza states that while reason "shows us all the passions that are to be destroyed" (KV 2/4, G I/60), reason itself has very limited power over them. In KV 2/21,

¹¹Spinoza alternates between saying that the objects of reason *seem* to be outside us and that they *are* outside us, and *mutatis mutandis* for the internality of the objects of highest knowledge. Depending which reading we privilege, the transition between the two highest kinds of knowledge can look metaphysically innocuous (merely a switch in how things seem) or quite bold (a switch in the location of the objects of knowledge relative to us). What is clear is that immediate knowledge of God, when we attain it, correctly presents ourselves as immediately related to God. I am unsure of what exactly Spinoza had in mind otherwise – this ambivalence may have been part of why he abandoned this view in E.

¹²Note that the issue of internality is distinct from that of generality. Even if reason is concerned with general properties (such as proportionality), those general properties might not apply to us, and so be external. The same is not true for the common things discussed in E.

Spinoza states that opinions, which are the causes of all the passions,

are either report or experience. And because whatever we find in ourselves has more power over us than anything which comes from outside, it follows that Reason can be a cause of the destruction of those opinions which we have only from report (because Reason has not come to us from outside), but not [a cause of the destruction] of those which we have through experience. (KV 2/21, G I/99, Curley's interpolation)

This means that reason can control only the weaker type of passions (ones based on opinions from report). Spinoza later glosses this conclusion in very strong terms: "reason, then, has no power to bring us to our well-being" (KV 2/22, G I/100). His discussion then turns to how, unlike reason, highest knowledge can bring us to our well-being and destroy all passions.

The view in E is again different. While Spinoza objects to the Stoics' unqualified optimism about controlling our passions, stating that "the Mind, or reason... does not have an absolute dominion over [the passions]" (E5Pref.), the qualification he proposes is merely that "much practice and application are required to restrain and moderate them" (ibid.). In the early propositions of Part 5, Spinoza goes on to argue for a view of reason's power over the passions that lacks any restriction like the one in KV.¹³ Appealing to common things, Spinoza argues that we can form a clear and distinct concept of all affects (E5p4). The appeal to common things shows that this is the operation of reason. He then states that knowing affects clearly and distinctly yields not only the result that "Love, Hate, etc., are destroyed.., but also that the appetites, or Desires, which usually arise from such an affect, cannot be excessive" (E5p4s), and concludes that "we can devise no other remedy for the affects which depends on our power and is more excellent than this, which consists in a true knowledge of them" (ibid.). Spinoza continues to accept that the highest kind of knowledge also can control the passions (cf. E5p20s), but there is no longer any suggestion that reason is restricted in the kind of passions it can in principle control.

(d) Reason vs. highest knowledge

¹³ Some commentators have argued that Spinoza's claims about reason's power in Part V are plausible only if they contain some implicit restriction along the lines of what we find in KV (e.g. Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, 131). I defend an unrestricted reading of those claims in Marshall, "Spinoza on Destroying Passions with Reason."

The final difference between the views in KV and E is not surprising, given the preceding. While both KV and E use the rule of three to draw a distinction between reason and highest knowledge, KV as a whole is insistent about this distinction in way that E is not. As we've seen, KV states that the reason, unlike highest knowledge, does not involve clear and distinct knowledge, presents things to us as outside us, and has limited power over the passions.¹⁴

Given how sharp the distinction between reason and the highest kind knowledge is in KV, it is surprising that Spinoza becomes quite casual about the contrast in E. For instance, while the title of Part 5 is "Of the power of the intellect, or of human freedom," and much of the chapter concerns intuitive knowledge of God (E5p25 and following), but in E5Pref., Spinoza states that he will "treating only of the power of the mind *or* of reason." Though the distinction has not been lost (Spinoza refers back to the distinction between the second and third kinds of knowledge in E5p20s), it occupies a much less prominent place than he does in KV.¹⁵

The central shift: reason and common notions

I want to propose that the four changes in Spinoza's view of reason have a common source. More specifically, I propose that there is a single core change in Spinoza's view, which is best understood in light of a view he holds in KV (and, in a weaker form, in E) about the relationship between the psychological power of an idea and metaphysical proximity of its object to our mind.

Let's return to the main explanation Spinoza gives in KV for why reason has limited power over the passions (in the chapter titled, "Of Reason"). After re-stating that all passions arise from either opinions of report or opinions of experience, Spinoza states:

because whatever we find in ourselves has more power over us than anything which comes from outside, it follows that Reason can be a cause of the destruction of those opinions which we have only from report (because Reason has not come to us from outside), but

¹⁴The distinction would be even stronger if Spinoza's view that the intellect is "wholly passive" in KV is meant to say that immediate knowledge is passive (Spinoza often uses "intellect" (*verstand*) to refer to the whole mind in KV, but he certainly seems to ascribe activity to the mind).

¹⁵Malinowski-Charles argues that reason and *scientia intuitiva* "must logically *always* be given together, being in reality the same knowledge, but simply under two modalities" (Malinowski-Charles, "The Circle of Adequate Knowledge," 142). Whether or not this is true in E, it is almost certainly not in KV.

not... of those which we have through experience (KV 2/21, G I/99)

The implication that reason is inside us is potentially confusing, given Spinoza's earlier claims that the objects of reason are outside us. Perhaps for this reason, Spinoza adds a marginal note to this passage:

It will be the same whether we use the word opinion here, or passion. And so it is clear why we cannot conquer by Reason those [opinions or passions] which are in us through experience; for these are nothing else in us but an enjoyment of, or immediate union with, something we judge to be good, and though Reason shows us something that is better, it does not make us enjoy it. Now what we enjoy in ourselves cannot be conquered by what we do not enjoy and what is outside us, as what Reason shows us is. But if it is to be conquered, there must be something that is more powerful, like an enjoyment of, and immediate union with, what is known to be better than the first and enjoyed more. And when this is present, the conquest is always inevitable. (KV 2/21, G I/99-100, my interpolation)

So while reason itself "has not come to us from outside," what it shows us is outside us.¹⁶

The point I think is crucial comes up in both passages. In the first, it is stated as "whatever we find in ourselves has more power over us than anything which comes from outside." In the second, as "what we enjoy in ourselves cannot be conquered by what we do not enjoy and what is outside us." That is, Spinoza relies on a principle connecting what we might *metaphysical proximity* (i.e. whether something is in us or outside us) with *psychological power*.¹⁷

Let's call this principle the 'Proximity-Power Connection.' The text leaves it unclear both what the relevant senses of 'inside' and 'outside' are (along with the boundaries of 'us'), as well as how strong this connection is supposed to be. The most straightforward reading would be to take the 'inside'/'outside' talk in a spatial sense, and to take the connection in a strict sense, so that any thing whatsoever that is inside our bodies has more power over us than any thing whatsoever that is outside our bodies. But that straightforward interpretation is implausible. It would imply both that (given the rule of three example) Spinoza thought numbers could be spatially inside or outside our bodies, and that Spinoza held that an inner wish had more power over us than an oncoming

¹⁶There is no inconsistency here (an analogy: the power of sight has not come to us from outside, though what it shows us is outside us). Mignini, "Spinoza's theory on the active and passive nature of knowledge," 43 seems to miss the externality of reason because of this passage.

¹⁷Spinoza also seems to state something like the converse of the principle: "By those [corruptible things] which are not in our power we understand those which, being outside us, do not undergo any changes through us, since they are very far removed from our actual essence" (KV 2/5, G I/64).

avalanche. More plausibly, I think, we could read the 'inside'/'outside' talk in terms of metaphysical inherence and our essence, and to take the connection in some weaker sense (perhaps as a *prima facie* principle, or as only concerning attainment of our genuine well-being). But there are surely other interpretive possibilities.

On any interpretation, though, it is clear that the scope of the Proximity-Power Connection is quite broad. In the two passages quoted above from KV 2/21, the psychological power Spinoza describes primarily concerns control over the passions. The second passage seems to be concerned merely with something like affective power (whether we 'enjoy' the object that is presented to us). But in the first passage, Spinoza bases his claim about reason's power on whether opinions (the cause of passions) can be destroyed by reason. So it seems that the Proximity-Power Connection is not limited to passions – it also concerns relations between opinions and beliefs.

I propose, then, that the Proximity-Power Connection is at the core of Spinoza's view of reason in KV. More specifically: given the Proximity-Power connection and the distinctive KV view that reason's objects are outside us, the other aspects of Spinoza's view in KV follow.¹⁸ We've seen how this is true for reason's limited control over the passions. It is also true for reason's lack of clarity and distinctness, for in the Cartesian tradition clarity (unlikely distinctness) is unquestionably a type of psychological power. As Descartes defines the notion in his *Principles*:

I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility (AT VIII.A.21, CSM I, 207)

So if an idea's object's being outside us comes with its having less psychological power, then it is natural to think that a faculty concerning objects outside us will be less powerful, and so be limited in various ways.

It is exactly this that yields the sharp distinction in KV between reason and highest knowledge. For Spinoza says (in KV 2/22) that the highest kind of knowledge is "an immediate manifestation of the object itself to the intellect" (G I/100). Focusing on knowledge of God, Spinoza then states that "because there is so close a union between God and us, it is evident that we can only understand him immediately" (G I/101). This is the

¹⁸A plausible but non-trivial background assumption here is that if a representation of X has power over a mind, that is a way of X having power over that mind.

starting point for Spinoza's discussion of why highest knowledge can control the passions via the love of God.

On this basis, I propose that the central change in Spinoza's view of reason between KV and E is his abandoning his view about the externality of reason's objects. For once reason is based on common notions, which are equally in us as in everything else, the Proximity-Power Connection allows him to hold that reason provides clear and distinct ideas and can control the passions, while weakening the distinction between reason and highest knowledge.¹⁹ Perhaps we can intuitively gloss this as follows: the objects of reason seem to be the same in both works, but in E they (and, by E2p7, their ideas) have moved inside us, giving reason greater power.

This proposal about the transition in Spinoza's thought assumes that the Proximity-Power Connection still plays some role in E. This is not obvious, however. Spinoza does not state the Connection there as such. Moreover, at least some of his claims in E seem to conflict with it: "No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause" (E3p4) and "The force by which a man perseveres in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes" (E4p3).

On the other hand, some of the propositions of the *Ethics* do, I think, reflect a version of the principle: "An affect whose cause we imagine to be with us in the present is stronger than if we did not imagine it to be with us" (E4p9), "Any singular thing whose nature is entirely different from ours can neither aid nor restrain our power of acting" (E4p29), and "Insofar as a thing agrees with our nature, it is necessarily good" (E4p31). Most clearly, however, Book 5 focuses on the second and third kinds of knowledge, which are based on ideas of common things or our body's essence (cf. E2p29s, E2p38ff., E5p31), stating that such knowledge yields a sort of immortality (E5p23), the greatest satisfaction of the mind (E5p27), and our being less acted on by evil affects (E5p37). So it seems that Spinoza still accepted the Proximity-Power Connection in the *Ethics*, albeit in what seems like a qualified (and therefore more plausible) form.

The Proximity-Power Connection and Apriority

¹⁹ We find this view in Ep. 37, where Spinoza states that "all the clear and distinct perceptions that we form can arise only from other clear and distinct perceptions which are in us, and they acknowledge no other cause *outside us*. Hence it follows that the clear and distinct perceptions that we form depend only on *our* nature and its definite and fixed laws" (my emphases, Shirley's translation).

If my proposal in the previous section is correct, then it would be worth seeing how much of the account of reason in E is motivated by Proximity-Power Connection. Since that would be beyond my present concerns, I close with some thoughts about the philosophical issues involved here and about why Spinoza might have been moved to relocate the objects of reason.

The general idea of there being some connection between psychological power and metaphysical proximity is not unique to Spinoza. Something like it seems to have been part of the motivation, for instance, for Kant's idealism about space. In the first *Critique*, Kant claim that the representation of space has feature which distinguishes it from most of our other representations: "One can never represent that there is no space, although one can very well think that there are no objects to be encountered in it".²⁰ This claim can be understood as a claim about the psychological power of the idea of space: we cannot get rid of it. Kant goes on to conclude, on the basis of this and other considerations, that "[s]pace is nothing other than the form of all appearances of outer sense".²¹ As many of Kant's readers understand it, this conclusion means that space is, in the first instance, merely something *in us*. In other words, Kant concludes that space itself must be in us (i.e. metaphysically close) on the basis of the power of the representation of space. Such an inference presupposes a connection between psychological power and metaphysical proximity.

Spinoza's decision to explain reason in terms of common things/common notions in E could be understood as having a similar motivation. Even if reason does not have the power of *scientia intuitiva*, its conclusions do have a great deal of psychological power (e.g. producing conviction, destroying passions). But accepting the Proximity-Power Connection, this would have posed a puzzle for Spinoza's earlier view, according to which the objects of reason are outside us. The solution, then, was to claim that there are things that are *equally* in us and in other things, about which we can reason. Like Kant, then, Spinoza takes the objects of certain powerful representations to be in us. Unlike Kant, he does not deny that they are also in entities distinct from us. It is a deep question as to which approach is

²⁰Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A24/B38, Guyer/Wood translation. See also A2, B5, A24/B38-9, A31/B46.

²¹*Ibid.*, A26/B42. Of course, other readings of these passages are possible, but the one I have described seems to me the most natural.

better.²²

²² Thanks to John Morrison, Don Garrett, and Alex Silverman for comments on earlier drafts, and to the attendees of the Young Spinoza conference for a helpful discussion.

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