

## Epistemic Autonomy in Spinoza

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One way to distinguish modern philosophy from post-modern philosophy is by the attitude toward epistemic autonomy. Post-modern philosophies maintain that knowledge is inescapably conditioned by social, political, and cultural forces, and an individual's beliefs are forever at the mercy of the torrents that sweep an age: there can be no objectivity, and no authenticity. But the modern philosophies all find some way for individuals to stand free of cultural forces and determine for themselves what is true, perhaps by the aid of some "skyhook" (such as the natural light) which can pull them out of their circumstances and allow them to see what is at the core of metaphysical reality. This rosy assessment of our abilities found its peak in the Enlightenment, of course, for which Kant supplied the famous motto, "*Sapere aude!* 'Dare to use your own reason!'" Of course, Kant believed that subtle transcendental reasoning was required to leverage some insight into our true epistemic situation, while the early modern philosophers each posited a more direct avenue to deep truth. The access may have been purely intellectual, or purely empirical, but in any event the access was unmediated and unpolluted by spurious ideology. They found it natural to suppose that some sort of pure perception is required in order for any of us to gain intellectual autonomy, which in turn is what we need in order to establish any kind of political or moral autonomy.

This is precisely what made each of the modern philosophies seem so radical to the political and religious institutions of the day, and no one's attitude was judged to be

more radical than Spinoza's. As Jonathan Israel argues, "[N]o one else during the century 1650-1750 remotely rivaled Spinoza's notoriety as the chief challenger of the fundamentals of revealed religion, received ideas, tradition, morality, and what was everywhere regarded, in absolutist and non-absolutist states alike, as divinely constituted political authority."<sup>1</sup> This notoriety was caused chiefly by the critique of religious knowledge Spinoza presented in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. His aim in that work was to show that the Bible, properly understood, does not recommend anything that is not also shown through autonomous philosophical reason, and also that sovereigns can grant citizens the liberty to philosophize without jeopardizing the civil order. In short, he championed epistemic autonomy over subordinating oneself to Scripture, and this is what earned him his reputation as an impious radical.

The critique Spinoza brought to revealed religion echoes throughout the epistemology presented in the *Ethics* and in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Indeed, it is no distortion of Spinoza's philosophy to read everything he wrote as part of an overall campaign to explain and encourage his readers' capacity to figure things out for themselves and break away from superstition and prejudice. But even as Spinoza exhorts his readers to dare to reason for themselves, he places them in a vast causal nexus in which everything they do and think is just as determined and just as necessary as the fact that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles. How then, for Spinoza, is it possible for us ever to rise above the causally-entangled matrix to discern and obey the dictates of reason? Why are we not all determined to live and think according to the irrational forces conditioning our very existence? One might think that if *anyone* ever had reason to believe that our powers of judgment are forever

conditioned by causal forces around us, Spinoza did. And yet he was the greatest inspiration to the thinkers of the Enlightenment. How strange!

### *I. Spinoza's epistemology*

To begin to come to terms with how epistemic autonomy is possible for Spinoza, we need to review the basics of his epistemology. A human body, according to Spinoza, is an impressionable compound of soft tissues that maintains its identity over time by keeping a constant metabolism of motion and rest. The environment presses upon the body in many ways, and the body is able to model the environment *physiologically* in response to these pressures. The body is thus a living map of one's experience. When we lift the informational content out of that physiological structure, we are considering the *mind* that is associated with that human body. And that is what Spinoza presumably means when he says that the mind is the idea of the body.

Now this living map is subtle and complex, as our model of the world does not merely contain every large impact our bodies have suffered, but also all the smaller impacts occasioned by whispered rumors and scribbled, scholarly footnotes. Moreover, we cannot help but associate all these impressions with one another as they repeatedly occur, and make generalizations from their similarities, and so we build up our memories and our imaginative powers. All of this, put together, constitutes our ordinary knowledge of the world, or what Spinoza calls knowledge of the first kind.

But this is not all there is to human knowledge. If it were, the mind would be completely at the mercy of its environment, and it would have very inadequate knowledge:

I say expressly that the Mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused knowledge, of itself, its own Body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of nature, i.e., so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long as it is determined internally.... For so often as it is disposed internally, in this or that way, then it regards things clearly and distinctly.... (2p29s)<sup>2</sup>

And so what saves us from this confusion is the possibility of our knowledge being determined from *within* – and not from within the body, exactly, but from within the mind itself.

Now here is where matters get tricky. The mind is a particular expression of God's attribute of thought, just as the body is an expression of God's attribute of extension. Thus each mind is substantially identical with God's thought, though it is limited and made particular in a specific way; that is, each mind is a *mode* of God's thought. Since it is substantially identical with thought, the mind bears the central features of thought: features which pertain to the mind as a *thinking* thing, as opposed to any other kind of thing. These central features of the mind are called *common notions*. Spinoza's parallelism licenses him to claim that the common notions are ideas of the correspondingly central features of bodies – those features which pertain to extended

things *qua* extended things. So the mind, as a thinking thing, is no blank slate, but has structural features by its very nature from which, as we shall see, all adequate ideas may be constructed.

Though Spinoza rarely offers examples, the set of common notions surely includes the ideas of extension, of motion and of rest, of geometrical shape and of arithmetic quantity, and of whatever other general features of the extended world are required to construct an adequate physics (see 2p38c).<sup>3</sup> The set no doubt includes other ideas as well, such as the ideas of God and of God's infinite essence (which will play a fundamental role in Spinoza's account of the highest form of knowledge). These ideas are all *adequate*. Spinoza calls an idea *inadequate* if it is a confused representation of both an external object and the state of one's body. Every instance of sense perception yields ideas that are inadequate in this way, since each sensation is as much about an object as it is about the state of the sensing organ. But the common notions are not gained through sense perception. They are innate to the mind in virtue of it being a mind, and so they are not confused representations of bodily states and external bodies; and it is for this reason they are adequate (see 2p11c and 2p38).

The task that lies before us, if we want to gain adequate knowledge, is to correct the beliefs we gain through sensory experience by building up the second kind of knowledge, or knowledge that is based upon and constructed from common notions. Ultimately, this is the antidote Spinoza supplies to the poisons of superstition and ignorance. But we are interested in raising the question of how this antidote is possible: *how* can we lift ourselves out of our physiologically-bound imaginations and memories and into some ideal conceptual space in which we can recognize our common notions and

build things with them? What causal force motivates us to turn our attention toward this ideal conceptual space – *why* are we interested in doing this? *What laws* within Spinoza’s universe will determine what we do there? And if those laws are deterministic, is there a threat that the second kind of knowledge may turn out to be just as partial, and subject to bias and corruption, as the first kind of knowledge?

## II. *Why gain adequate knowledge?*

Let us turn first to the question of motivation. Spinoza recounts his own found need to enter into an ideal conceptual space and find a secure path to knowledge in the early sections of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*:

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

Spinoza is after a “*true good*,” of course, and not just anything that will supply him with continuous joy. A few paragraphs later, he focuses on exactly what it is he hopes to acquire: a different human nature, one that is “stronger and more enduring” than his current human nature (section 13). Moreover, he believes that this stronger and more

enduring nature *consists in* “the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of nature.” Note that gaining the stronger nature is not something we learn how to do once we gain the knowledge; rather, having the stronger nature consists in having the knowledge. This knowledge, he believes, will give him continuously “the greatest joy, to eternity,” and he desires others to gain the same knowledge: “That is, it is part of my happiness to take pains that many others may understand as I understand, so that their intellect and desire agree entirely with my intellect and desire” (section 14).

Spinoza offers a more detailed account of this in parts 3 and 4 of the *Ethics*. In surveying this account, the first step is to recognize that he defines the actual essence of each individual thing as a *striving* for its own continued existence (3p7). The actual essence of a mind then, is the striving for its own continued existence. Spinoza thinks that a direct consequence of this proposition is that the mind strives to imagine only those things which posit its power of acting (3p54). That is, the mind, as it strives to continue to exist, welcomes images of conditions for its continued existence. Naturally, this kind of striving can lead to plenty of error and confusion, since Spinoza here is describing just a propensity on our part to see ourselves in favorable lights. We welcome praise and flattery, and daydream about all sorts of accomplishments, merely because the mind feels joy in those images (see 3p55s).

As a second step in Spinoza’s account, if we focus more narrowly on a part of the mind – the part consisting of common notions and adequate ideas, which Spinoza calls “reason” (2p40s2) – then we can make similar claims on its behalf: reason also seeks its own continued existence, and enjoys the exercise of its own power. What power is this? Reason, Spinoza argues, “does not judge anything useful to itself except what leads to

understanding” (4p26). This is because the essence of reason is to understand things clearly and distinctly. Thus the striving which constitutes the essence of reason is a striving for adequate ideas.

So we are motivated to enter an ideal conceptual space in order to satisfy a longing housed in a part of our mind, the longing for adequate ideas. Still, why shouldn't this desire be overwhelmed by other irrational parts of the mind, such as the part that seeks the esteem of others, or the one that seeks the pleasures of self-deception? To be sure, Spinoza thinks this is the case all too often – that is the problem. But the particular drive for adequate knowledge, when it is satisfied, leads to *self-esteem*, which Spinoza thinks is “the highest thing we can hope for”:

Self-esteem [*acquiescentia in se ipso*] is a joy born of the fact that man considers himself and his power of acting (by Def. Aff. 15). But man's true power of acting, *or* virtue, is reason itself (by 3p3), which man considers clearly and distinctly (by 2p40 and p43). Therefore self-esteem arises from reason.

Next, while a man considers himself, he perceives nothing clearly and distinctly, *or* adequately, except those things which follow from his power of acting (by 3d2), that is (by 3p3), which follow from his power of understanding. And so the greatest self-esteem there can be arises only from this self-reflection. (4p52d)

This *acquiescentia in se ipso* appears again at the end of part 4 of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza advises us to gain a clear picture of our powers, what we are able to do and what



we must abide by, and to understand ourselves as part of nature. “If we understand this clearly and distinctly,” he writes, “that part of us which is defined by understanding, that is, the better part of us, will be entirely satisfied with this, and will strive to persevere in that satisfaction [*acquiescentia*]. For insofar as we understand, we can want nothing except what is necessary, nor absolutely be satisfied with anything except what is true.” This, perhaps, is a recognition that comes only after one learns that “all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile.”

### *III. Common notions*

But even if we have strong motivation to form adequate ideas, it is not yet clear that we have the ability to do so. Somehow, the common notions must enjoy a special sort of status to allow us to gain a privileged type of knowledge. What is this special status?

To help to see the nature of the problem, consider first how widely the common notions are distributed. They are inherent to minds in virtue of their being minds – they are intrinsic to the nature of thought. But this makes them intrinsic to *every* mind – and in Spinoza’s metaphysics, this means the idea of each and every physical entity:

“[W]hatever we have said of the idea of the human Body must also be said of the idea of any thing” (2p13s). How then does the presence of common notions in *our* minds give *us* any special ability to use them in gaining adequate knowledge of the world? What makes us any more epistemically privileged than (say) a carrot?

Spinoza does note that not all ideas are equal, and he would recognize the idea of a human as different from the idea of a carrot insofar as the idea of a human body is

“more excellent” and “contains more reality” than does the idea of the carrot. In general, says Spinoza, “in proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its Mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once” (2p13s). And so presumably the human mind is more excellent than the “mind” of the carrot because the human body is capable of building a more complex internal model of its environment, and is capable of a wider range of responses to its environment.

But this point about our bodies’ capacities seems only to explain why we would be better than carrots at gaining knowledge of the first kind: we are better at employing our imaginations. It is difficult to see why this should allow us a greater range of adequate knowledge -- *if* adequate knowledge requires something other than the imagination. Does it? At 2p25c, Spinoza claims that “insofar as the human Mind imagines an *external body*, it does not have adequate knowledge of it” (emphasis added). But what if the mind is imagining not an external body, but the object of some idea internal to itself, such as a semicircle or a sphere? The problem with imagining external bodies is that the human mind will possess only the information that is yielded through causal contact with the body; through that experience, the human mind will have no information regarding all the other forces conditioning the external body’s existence. If we want to translate this point into Spinozistic god-talk, we will say that the idea of the external body is not adequate in God’s mind insofar as God constitutes the human mind; it is adequate only insofar as God constitutes the idea of the external body itself.<sup>4</sup>

But when it comes to employing the imagination in forming complex ideas out of simpler ingredients that are *internal* to the human mind, perhaps the limitations of the

imagination will not matter: the imagination is not drawing upon the fragmented and partial information yielded through sense experience, but instead has full access to the information contained within the mind's innate common notions. Spinoza does not explicitly discuss using the imagination in this way -- that is, working in partnership with common notions -- though it would seem that he has to invoke it at some point if he wants to explain why human beings are smarter than carrots. (At 2p39, he does claim that when human bodies are "usually" affected by external bodies by virtue of some feature they both share, the human mind will have an adequate idea of that feature; this at least opens the door to letting the imagination play some role in the construction of adequate ideas.) So let us suppose that if we run our imaginations using only the common notions provided by reason as input, then we can construct more complex adequate ideas. (Kant, for whatever it's worth, advocated something like this in the case of synthetic *a priori* intuition.)

We have some confirmation for this proposal in 2p17s, where Spinoza writes that

... the imaginations of the Mind, considered in themselves, contain no error, or the Mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea that excludes the existence of those things that it imagines to be present to it. For if the Mind, while it imagined nonexistent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things did not exist, it would, of course, attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its nature, not to a vice -- especially if this faculty of imagining depended only on its true nature, i.e. (by 1d7), if the Mind's faculty of imagining were free.

The invocation of 1d7 at the end of this passage recalls Spinoza's sense of freedom as self-determination: when an entity's behavior is determined by its own nature, then it is said to be free. The mind's faculty of imagining is in this case free to the extent that (a) the basic ingredients out of which ideas are being formed (that is, the common notions) belong to the mind itself; (b) the processes of the imaginative faculty are autonomous; and (c) the mind suffers from no illusion about what it is doing, or whether the ideas it forms correspond to existent objects.

Now this self-determination in forming ideas is paralleled, of course, by some kind of self-determination of the body. Or, as Spinoza puts it in 2p13s, "[I]n proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies concur with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly." So to the extent that our bodies' motions are determined by internal forces, the actions of our minds are also determined by internal forces. Self-determined actions of the mind – whether volitions or calculations or conceptualizations – lead to real understanding precisely because they are self-determined, and there is no opportunity for the kind of confusion that arises in the case of the first kind of knowledge. Epistemic autonomy and physical autonomy are of a piece: to the extent that my actions are determined by myself, and not by others, then to that extent my thoughts are determined by internal, autonomous, and reliable forces, and are not skewed by the external and thoroughly unreliable forces of superstition, illusion, ignorance, and confusion. Here we find a metaphysical foundation for Spinoza's political liberalism.

#### IV. *Autonomy in mind and body*

We have seen that adequate knowledge, for Spinoza, is founded on both mental and physical autonomy: when the mind is self-determined and (in parallel) the body is self-determined, then the ideas the mind forms will be adequate. But, of course, the human body is caught in a great causal nexus, according to Spinoza, in which one body's behavior is determined by another's, and that by another's, and so on *ad infinitum*. Similarly, each idea is conditioned by another, and so on. The human self, according to Spinoza, is only a finite mode of a substance, always at the mercy of more powerful modes surrounding it. In such a scheme, how is it ever possible for a mind or a body to act autonomously?

If Spinoza takes this autonomy seriously, then he needs to carve out free spaces for both the mind and the body -- spaces in which they can each be self-determined, and not pushed around by other things. Perhaps for the body this is less of a problem. For although it may never actually happen that a body's trajectory is completely determined by its own inertia (or, in more complex cases, the ratio of motion and rest among a body's parts perhaps is never perpetuated completely on its own without interruption), we can still make sense of the body's *own* contribution to its behavior. That is, we can parcel out the portions of its behavior that are due to the body's own powers, and speak of *the extent to which* a body's behavior is self-determined. But how are we to do this for the mind? What is it for a mind to act autonomously?

Note that we should not simply exploit Spinoza's doctrine of parallelism and let the mind's autonomy ride piggy-back on the body's. If thought and extension are as

conceptually distinct as Spinoza believes they are, such a piggy-back ride is not legitimate. There should be something Spinoza can say about the determination of ideas that does not force us to fall back on the physical. We should take Spinoza at his word when he writes in 2p7s: “Hence, so long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of nature, *or* the connection of causes, through the attribute of Thought alone.”

So we need to focus on the way in which the intellect thinks autonomously, or the way that the intellect, on its own steam as it were, passes from state to state, which is supposed to run in parallel with the body’s autonomous passage from state to state. Describing and prescribing this autonomous passage of thought is the central concern of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Spinoza’s prescription there is what he calls “the Method,” and its ultimate aim is to deduce all our ideas from the “fixed and eternal things” so that “our mind will reproduce Nature as much as possible” (sections 99-106). Autonomous thought is also one of Spinoza’s deepest concerns in parts 2 through 5 of the *Ethics*, where he distinguishes epistemic autonomy from psychological determination, or the passage of thought that is determined by the idiosyncrasies of one’s own experience and temperament.<sup>5</sup> The overarching theme of Spinoza’s ethical philosophy is that to the extent our thinking and behavior is determined by “the common order of nature, i.e., so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that” (2p29s), we suffer from confusion and we act in irrational ways. But to the extent that our thinking is determined by *reason*, we have the best chance of leading our lives equitably. The passage of autonomous thought is thus determined logically, not psychologically.

But it seems odd that the logical determination of thought should run in parallel with whatever the body is doing while the thinker thinks autonomously. Indeed, what is the body doing when we reason? When we are engaged in the first kind of knowledge, reflecting surrounding bodies and tripping along from imaginative association to imaginative association, then it is more plausible to think that our experience will run in parallel with our physiological states. But matters seem like they should be very different when we lift ourselves into an ideal realm, contemplating lines, planes, motion, and so on. Linking this style of thought to certain physiological processes seems to rob reason of its chief virtue, namely, its ability to stand above the causal fray and draw its conclusions independently of whatever forces the body is subject to.

Let us cast the point in a ham-fisted way: if using reason is identical with (say) “K fibers” firing in the brain, then it seems like the firing of “K fibers” can always be disturbed in some way -- perhaps by listening to long lectures, or by ingesting certain varieties of mushroom, or by brain surgery. Wouldn't this physical susceptibility turn around and compromise the validity of reason? The question, really, is how Spinoza can insulate the intellect from the ways in which the body can get things wrong, given the parallelism between mind and body.

#### V. *Autonomous and embodied reason?*

In earlier works, Spinoza seems to have given in to the rationalist's (or the stoic's) temptation to make reason somehow detachable from the body.<sup>6</sup> In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise*, and the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Spinoza

describes the soul's capacity to break its attachment with the body and join itself instead to God. The soul does this when it employs reason as a step-ladder to intuitive knowledge, which is a love-infused union with God and the soul's greatest joy. (This is, perhaps, why Spinoza writes in the *Treatise* that gaining a stronger and more enduring nature *consists in* attaining the highest kind of knowledge -- since by gaining that knowledge, we have united ourselves with an eternal being, and have somehow left behind the dead weight of the flesh.) But -- at least in a large portion of the *Ethics* -- Spinoza has abandoned the proposal that any part of the mind is detachable from the body, though he still wants to maintain that reason can act autonomously. It would appear that Spinoza wants all the ontological advantages of a naturalistic psychology alongside rationalism's grand prize, which is to be determined by the forces of reason alone. Can he have it both ways?<sup>7</sup>

Of course this is not a question Spinoza ignores. He tries to explain exactly how the mind is able to engage in reason, and his account draws upon the body's own physical nature -- specifically, the features the body has in common with all bodies in the universe. The outline of the strategy is already familiar: since the body has features in common with all other bodies, the mind has ideas in common with all minds, and it is in virtue of these parallel commonalities that the mind is able to reason adequately about the true nature of extended things. But this implies that when we reason, the body is somehow activating those features it has in common with all other bodies. In other words, if we ask what the body is doing when we reason, the answer is that it is somehow engaging with the facts that it is extended, and is capable of motion, and so on. But how does a body "engage" with these facts, or "activate" them? Our earlier suggestion was



that, when we reason, we employ the imagination in conjunction with the common notions in order to construct adequate ideas; if so, then similarly it seems that the body should exercise its own imaginative machinery (whatever that is) upon those features it has in common with other bodies. That is, the body's own extension and mobility should become objects processed in some fashion by the physiological process of the imagination.

The good news here is that the body's being extended and mobile (and so on) cannot be disturbed by one's partaking of long lectures or mushrooms or brain surgery. But the bad news is that surely the physiological processes of the imagination can be disturbed or distorted by such things. To the extent that reasoning must run in parallel with some complex bodily process, and any such process is susceptible to alien interference, Spinoza's reason loses its autonomy. And thus it appears that, despite Spinoza's careful epistemological engineering, our ability to reason can indeed be compromised by the body's own weaknesses.<sup>8</sup>

Did Spinoza embrace this conclusion? There are many passages which suggest he did. Consider 4p4c, where Spinoza takes himself to have demonstrated that "man is necessarily always subject to the passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires," and the preface to *Ethics* part 3, where he mocks those who think of human beings as living in some insulated dominion within nature's dominion.<sup>9</sup> Maybe human reason is a lot like our body's trajectory: always pushed or pulled by other things, but striving so far as it can to maintain its own self-determination. If so, then in fact we do not have complete epistemic autonomy except under very rare and ideal conditions.

But at the same time, there are passages which suggest that we can take the initiative, block those alien cognitive influences, and reason for ourselves. This is the “self-help” side of the *Ethics*. Spinoza’s principal business in part 5 is to demonstrate what power the mind can have over its passions, and he writes there that “if clear and distinct knowledge does not remove [the passions], at least it brings it about that they constitute the smallest part of the Mind” (5p20s). In the end, Spinoza does want to secure a remedy against the corruption of the affects; he wants to regard reason as a reliable and safe haven, a space we can always enter when we want to separate ourselves from the fortuitous affects of the body and direct our minds to what is fixed and eternal. This is not just a matter of our being lucky enough to find a quiet spot in which we can reason. We can establish these quiet spots ourselves, by lifting ourselves out of the mix. It is Spinoza’s skyhook -- one to which he is not really entitled (as is the trouble, alas, with skyhooks in general).

#### VI. *Detached reason*

I said earlier that through large portions of the *Ethics*, Spinoza does not regard reason as separable from the body. Large portions, yes -- but not all. In other parts of the *Ethics* (chiefly in part 5), Spinoza clings to a descendent of his earlier view that the mind can detach itself from the body.

The motivation for holding this view should be apparent, given the problem we have just seen of coupling reason with any kind of complex physiological process. Those processes can always be disturbed; but if the mind could somehow float free of them,

there would be no worry of reason going astray. Moreover, perhaps we can see how Spinoza might convince himself that at least part of the mind can be detached from the body. The mind's common notions, as we have seen, are not unique to any particular individual -- they are common to all minds, or ideas of all extended things. Set aside for now the suggestion that we employ our individual imaginations when we build complex ideas out of common notions, and suppose that -- somehow -- we can build up adequate ideas just through those common notions alone. Insofar as we "think through" just these common notions, we are thinking not as particular individuals, but as the power of thought itself -- that is, we are uniting our minds with the infinite intellect of God. We have left behind the features and forces which individuate us from all other finite modes, and are thinking *sub specie aeternitatis*. As we have seen, this cannot really work in Spinoza's system, since constructing complex ideas must require more processing above and beyond the mere fact that one has a body that is extended and mobile and so on. (Otherwise, carrots would be capable of such tranquil meditation.) Still, it is plausible that Spinoza thought something like this detachment is possible for us, especially given many of his claims throughout the second half of the *Ethics*. Let us call this hopeful illusion of his the "detachment view."

According to the detachment view, as we exercise our intellects, we are in a certain sense leaving behind the circumstances that individuate our body from the rest of the cosmos, and are drawing our ideas from more fundamental and pervasive features of the universe -- "the fixed and eternal things," again. Our thoughts are not determined by fortuitous motions of the body, but by thought's own laws; we become like a "spiritual automaton" following whatever laws of logic govern the intellect (*Treatise*, section 85).

These logical laws determine our thoughts, but in a way that is distinct from the causal determination that pertains to ideas of affections of the body. The passage from the sight of hoofprints to the thought of a horseman to the thought of a soldier is causally determined in a way that is similar to the passage from brain state A to state B to state C, but it is different from the passage from the thought of a line, to the possibility of rotating it, with the result of a circle. Causal determination can lead to various mistakes and confusions, but logical determination cannot.

Thus, on the detachment view, when Spinoza says that the mind and body are *the same thing* considered under different attributes, the identity has to be construed much more loosely. There may be tight overlap when we are considering imaginative ideas and physiological states of one's body. But when it comes to ideas drawn from the intellect, the identity is not between ideas and brain states, but instead between ideas and the objects represented in the ideas (which are often, though not always, entities that are or would be extended). When Spinoza writes of the idea of a circle, for instance, he takes its object to be a circle existing in nature, and not the brain state of someone who is thinking of a circle (2p7s). Indeed, what makes the intellect so special is that its ideas are drawn from features common to all things, and so the ideas are capable of representing genuine physical possibilities rooted in the true nature of things, and not rooted merely in one's own arbitrary experience or one's physiology. The intellect's ideas are *about* real possibilities, and not *about* the peculiar state of one's own body.

This would mean that when our thought is determined by the laws of the intellect, according to the detachment view, we are having an out-of-the-body experience; at least, out of *our* body, though not necessarily out of *body* in a very general sense, since our

mind is directed toward features that are present somehow in corporeal nature. We attain epistemic autonomy by engaging in reflection that is not bound by the limitations of our individual, sense-organ based minds, and find that union our intellects have with the mind of God.

Attributing the detachment view to Spinoza would explain how, in part 5 of the *Ethics*, he can turn his attention to “those things which pertain to the Mind’s duration without relation to the body” (5p20s), a passage which is otherwise notoriously baffling. The mind, Spinoza goes on to demonstrate, is aware of the body only while the body endures; and when the body is destroyed, something of the mind remains. “We feel and know by experience that we are eternal,” he says, and that eternal part of us is reason, or our ability to understand things *sub specie aeternitatis*. And our greatest joy is not just gaining this understanding, but also experiencing the tremendous intellectual joy that accompanies it, which leads to a deep intellectual love of the final object of our understanding, God or Nature.

This is the appropriate place to bring the third kind of knowledge into play. In addition to the first two kinds of knowledge, Spinoza believes we are also capable of coming to know certain things in virtue of our intellects containing an adequate idea of God’s essence. At times we can recognize a truth immediately as a consequence of that essence. We simply *see*, without the meditation of rational demonstration, that something is so, and we see rightly. Our greatest joy, and our greatest love, arises from this kind of insight, as it is the consciousness of our union with God and the various ways in which things are rooted in God’s nature – precisely the kind of knowledge Spinoza said he wanted in the beginning of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.

I believe Spinoza did indeed hold the detachment view, at times, in various moods, though he was not entitled to it, given his doctrine of parallelism. It was a kind of blind soft spot. Moreover, as we shall see next, the view led him into a philosophical position which is inspiring to any mystic, but which also ends up compromising the epistemic autonomy he esteemed so highly.

### VII. *Enlightenment*

It is strange that Spinoza does not make more use of the third kind of knowledge, given its importance to him. Many times he gives an example of the *sort* of thing direct apprehension is (seeing immediately that two is to four as three is to six, for example), but he never offers a claim and then justifies it by saying that this is something he has perceived directly as a consequence of God's attributes. He does not call intuition into service in the way Descartes presses the natural light into service. He is coy about it, and merely tantalizes us with the claim that having it brings us the highest kind of joy and love we can possibly experience.

It is possible that he did not believe words could convey the things he has come to understand through this pure intuition. Many mystics feel this way. But it is also possible that Spinoza intended to leave the matter open-ended so as to encourage his readers to try to discover what they can for themselves. After claiming that "we feel and know by experience that we are eternal", he goes on to say that "the Mind *feels* those things that it conceives in understanding no less than those it has in memory. For the eyes of the mind, by which it *sees* and *observes* things, are the demonstrations themselves" (5p23s;

emphases added). Here Spinoza is gesturing toward a personal experience that goes beyond knowing *that* a certain claim is true. In this passage, when he claims that the eyes of the mind are the demonstrations themselves, he is *not* making the claim that the sorts of demonstrations that Spinoza offers for propositions in the *Ethics* are eyes of the mind; rather, the intellectual vision one experiences in knowledge of the third kind is itself the only demonstration needed for the truth that is apprehended. The vision is irreducibly first-person, as is the joy and love that comes along with the vision. It simply would not serve any purpose to have a list of things Spinoza has discovered through intuition, since intuition is valuable only because of the great *acquiescentia* that one experiences with it. So, in short, Spinoza is telling us not only to dare to use our own reason, as Kant says, but also to dare to trust what our minds feel.

So Spinoza, like many mystics, encourages his readers to seek their own apprehension of the truth, and not rest content with what they hear from others. But also like other mystics, the goal Spinoza aims toward is a state of being in which the notion of epistemic autonomy becomes empty. For *who* is the subject of this mystical epistemic autonomy? Follow what happens to our understanding of the self as we trace through Spinoza's program. Our greatest striving is toward the third kind of knowledge and the intellectual love of God. As we gain more of this knowledge and love, a smaller portion of our mind is bound up with conclusions drawn from the first kind of knowledge; so, gratefully, we fear death less, and love God more. We begin to associate ourselves less and less with our body – which is known to us only through the imagination – and take up our residence in the infinite intellect of God, so that a greater part of our mind is eternal. But as we succeed, we lose touch with all of the features that made us who we

thought we were to begin with. We work toward identifying ourselves with ideas that were in existence in God long before our bodies were born, and our existence after our bodies die will be about as meaningful to us as our pre-existence was. In the end, what has become of the self seeking to gain epistemic autonomy? The self ultimately resides in the infinite intellect of God; it is only for a brief interim that a connection to a body has confused it into thinking it was anything else. But really, as Spinoza writes,

it is clear that our Mind, insofar as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking, and this again by another, and so on, to infinity; so that together, they all constitute God's eternal and infinite intellect. (5p40s)

This account of the true self is surely meant to be uplifting and inspiring, though there is more than a hint of oblivion as well. In the end, it is an idea in God's intellect that has adequate knowledge, and enjoys *acquiescentia in se ipso*, at least as much as any changeless and eternal thing can. But this idea has had adequate knowledge all along. It is only a fragmented individual – i.e., a mode of thought, considered *not* insofar as it is contained within God's intellect – that has gradually accomplished some degree of self-knowledge. And this individual, we have discovered, is not the greatest or most excellent part of the mind.

Finally, we can point out as well the problem of how it is still possible to act for the sake of other autonomies (such as moral and political autonomy), once we have gained epistemic autonomy. How is it possible to have concern for morality and politics,



once one has a vision of things *sub specie aeternitatis*? Once we attain *acquiescentia in se ipso*, we gain the recognition that what is, is necessary, and nothing can be avoided.

This is the solace one seeks when the burden of the world becomes too wearisome. But Spinoza, out of a hope he cannot legitimately have, tries to return from that mystical self-knowledge and assert the importance involving oneself in change. This is surely a problem to pursue on another occasion, but for now it seems that in Spinoza's philosophy, mystical enlightenment has become an obstacle for the philosophical Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Israel 2001: 159.

<sup>2</sup> Translations of Spinoza are Curley's, found in Spinoza 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Curley has pointed out that Spinoza dissociates geometrical entities from things that are "physical and real" in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, section 95. Geometrical entities are mere "beings of reason." But surely they will be required in constructing an adequate physics. So perhaps geometrical entities are not to be counted among common notions, but instead as ideal things which can be constructed out of more basic notions of "real things" like extension and motion. See Curley 1973: 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of the relativity of the adequacy of ideas, see Della Rocca 1996: chapters 3 and 6. See also Bennett 2001: vol. 1, section 78.

<sup>5</sup> But there are also significant differences in the accounts offered in the *Treatise* and the *Ethics*; see again Curley 1973: 40-54.

<sup>6</sup> For more discussion of Spinoza's attitudes, both early and late, to the question of immortality, see Nadler 2002: chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Bennett 2001: vol. 1, 205: "Spinoza, uniquely among the philosophers that I know, tries to have it both ways: thoroughly a naturalist about reason, which he openly treats as a causal process, he nevertheless claims it to be infallible and offers to explain why."

<sup>8</sup> One is reminded here of Nietzsche's critique of Spinoza himself in *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 5, calling his geometrical method "that hocus-pocus of mathematical form in which, as if in iron, Spinoza encased and masked his philosophy ... -- how much

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personal timidity and vulnerability this masquerade of a sick recluse betrays!” (Nietzsche 1973: 37).

<sup>9</sup> He even writes in the *Political Treatise* that “it is not in every man’s power always to use reason and to be at the highest pitch of human freedom,” but the *uniuscujus homine* might mean only that not every single one of us is capable; maybe a privileged few are.

Chapter two, section 8, translated by Samuel Shirley (Spinoza 2000: 41).

<sup>10</sup> I thank the audience at the 2005 Pacific Northwest / Western Canadian Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy for helpful criticism of an earlier version of this paper, and I thank Russell Wahl for extensive comments on a later version.