

NATURE AND
NECESSITY
IN SPINOZA'S
PHILOSOPHY



DON GARRETT

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Spinoza's Philosophy*

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- 16 “‘A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively’: Freedom and the Good in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, edited by Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: Brill, 1990): 221–238
- 17 “Spinoza’s Ethical Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Don Garrett (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 267–314
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*Nature and Necessity in
Spinoza's Philosophy*

Introduction

BENEDICT DE SPINOZA was one of the most important philosophers of the early modern period and one of the most systematic. Before his death in 1677, at the age of forty-four, he developed a comprehensive conception of the universe and of the place of humanity within it, one that offers distinctive and powerful answers to many of the most fundamental questions that human beings face about how to think, feel, and act.

The framework in which Spinoza developed that conception relies on his own carefully adapted and refined versions of a constellation of key philosophical concepts. These include those of infinite and self-sufficient *substance*, essential *attributes*, and resulting *modes*; of *God* or *Nature*; of absolute *necessity*, determining *causation*, and self-determining *freedom*; of finite *singular things*, their *conatus* for self-preservation, and their *affects* or emotions; of *contract*, *rights*, *law*, and *the state*; and of *virtue*, *love*, and *blessedness*. The framework also employs a number of crucial distinctions, including those between *God as absolutely infinite* and *God insofar as it constitutes particular modes*; between *natura naturans* (Nature as original cause) and *natura naturata* (Nature as everything resulting from that cause); between *eternity* and *duration*; between *essence* and *existence*; between a singular thing's unchanging *formal essence* within an attribute and its *actual essence* in duration; between internal *immanent causation* and external *transitive causation*; between physical *extension* and mental *thought*; between *objective being* in thought and *formal being* outside of thought; between ideas that are *true and adequate*, and ideas that are *false and inadequate*; between the *intellect* and the *imagination*; between *actions* and *passions*, and so between *freedom* and *bondage*; between *philosophy* and *theology*, and so between *reason* and *faith*; and between *good* and *evil*.

Within this framework, Spinoza propounds a series of connected theses that are initially astounding: that there exists only one substance, which is both God and Nature; that this one substance exists necessarily; that every singular thing, including every human being, is a mode of that one substance; that every state of

affairs and every occurrence, including every human action, follows necessarily from the nature of that substance and could not have been otherwise; that God is not a person and has no purposes or desires; that reality and perfection are the same thing and come in degrees; that everything that exists is necessarily both extended and thinking; that extension and thought cannot causally influence one another; that the human body and the human mind are one and the same thing; that the human mind is literally a part of God's infinite intellect; that every being is thinking to some degree; that the endeavor to persevere in being is the fundamental principle of the activity of every human being and every other singular thing as well; that reason can motivate actions; that virtue is power; that an obligation to keep promises exists only as long as it is advantageous to do so; that it is sometimes reasonable to love, praise, and feel approval for human beings, but never reasonable to hate, blame, or feel indignation for them; that the highest good for a human being is understanding, which may be shared with others and can only be achieved with their aid; and that adequate understanding is the source of an intellectual love of God that constitutes participation, during one's lifetime, in eternal blessedness and largely allows one to overcome the fear of death. Just as remarkably, he claims to establish these conclusions with the force of geometrical demonstration almost entirely through the resources of the intellect, with minimal direct appeal to sense experience.

Yet despite his initially astounding conclusions, no important philosopher of the seventeenth century strikes a deeper chord with a broader range of contemporary readers than Spinoza. In part, this is because he is *systematic*: his approach aims to derive ethics from psychology, and psychology from epistemology and metaphysics. In part, it is because he is *edifying*: his comprehensive philosophical system naturally inspires in readers a sense of the unity and interrelatedness of all things, and it is intended not merely to increase their knowledge but also to bring them joy while freeing their minds and improving their characters as citizens. In part, it is because he is personally *admirable*: he lived with integrity and without ostentation, in harmony with his neighbors and in abiding fellowship with his devoted friends. Bertrand Russell called him, for this reason, "the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers."

Spinoza also strikes a deep chord with many readers, however, because he is *progressive*: surprisingly often, his philosophy seems to anticipate and point the way to ideas—whether in science, religion, psychology, politics, or ethics—that prove to be strikingly apt for the modern world. Many of his most progressive ideas, in this sense, reflect his *naturalism*—that is, his refusal to countenance the reality of anything that would be outside of nature. Thus, he resolutely rejects supernatural or transcendent beings, real abstract beings, and Platonic universals; explanatorily basic normative properties of goodness or "oughtness" and explanatorily basic intentional properties of meaning or "aboutness"; and miraculous

events and uncaused acts of “free will” that would be outside the natural causal order of things. Thus, for example, Albert Einstein famously replied to a question about his own belief in God by asserting “I believe in Spinoza’s God, who reveals Himself in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God who concerns Himself with the fate and the doings of mankind.” No doubt Spinoza strikes a chord in some readers, too, precisely because he seems *esoteric*: his ideas, arguments, and manner of expression are all highly demanding, directed primarily at the philosophical few rather than the common multitude. He highlights this feature of his philosophy himself in the famous final line of the *Ethics*: “All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”

The present volume contains most of my writings on Spinoza’s philosophy, brought together for the first time from many different original sources, some of them now difficult to find. All are intended, at least in large part, to resolve challenging and central problems in the interpretation of Spinoza’s difficult but important philosophy, and I hope that bringing them together in this way will help to illuminate the systematic connections among those problems and their solutions. These writings are published here without alteration in their original formats, even when this involves some diversity from chapter to chapter in manners of citation and style.

The volume also contains new substantial postscripts to four of the earliest articles to be published. Each of these postscripts, like the chapters to which they are now appended, concerns a central topic in Spinoza’s philosophy: the ontological argument for the existence of God, substance monism, strict necessitarianism, and consciousness, respectively. They do not constitute by any means a comprehensive review of subsequent Spinoza scholarship even on the specific topics they address. Rather, they provide what I take to be essential supplements to the original cases for my interpretive theses, presented chiefly as direct responses to forceful criticisms and detailed alternative interpretations subsequently developed by a few of the Spinoza scholars I admire most and have learned the most from over the years. I have also used these postscripts to register a few corrections and improvements to my earlier terminology and argumentation.

In identifying God with Nature—as “*Deus sive Natura*” in his memorable phrase—Spinoza in effect divinizes Nature, finding in it many perfections traditionally associated only with a supreme deity. At the same time, however, he also naturalizes God, finding in it many features traditionally associated with an impersonal natural world. The title of this volume, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza’s Philosophy*, is intended in part to reflect the crucial role in Spinoza’s philosophical system of his distinctive conception of Nature as the only substance and the first cause of all things, outside of which nothing could exist or act. However, he also uses the term “nature” (“*natura*”) to refer to a thing’s nature or “essence” (“*essentia*”), and the title is intended equally to reflect the crucial role that such

natures play, within Spinoza's philosophical system, in producing and explaining the properties and actions of things within Nature. God or Nature itself has a nature or essence in this second sense, consisting of infinitely many attributes—including extension and thought. Importantly, however, singular things, as modes of God or Nature, each have their own natures or essences (both “formal” and “actual”) as well, through which they approximate to the absolute thing-hood of substance and from which their activity flows. Finally, the title is intended to reflect the crucial role that Spinoza assigns to the strict logical-metaphysical necessity (“*necessitas*”) with which God or Nature exists and has the nature or essence that it does, and the equally strict necessity with which everything else follows from that nature, including the natures of singular things and the events that follow necessarily from the interactions among them.

After a preliminary overview of the primary themes of Spinoza's *Ethics* in Chapter 1 (“Spinoza's *Ethics*: The Metaphysics of Blessedness”), the volume is divided into six sections of three, or in one case two, chapters each, sometimes with postscripts. Within each section, the chapters are ordered by date of original publication. Because my own order of investigation and understanding on a topic has often followed Spinoza's own “geometrical” order of deduction and explanation, however, the two orders often coincide. What follows is a brief summary of each section.

Section I: Necessity and God's Nature. Spinoza first states his pantheistic substance monism in *Ethics* 1p14: “Except God, no substance can be or be conceived.” His demonstration of this proposition depends chiefly on two previous propositions: “In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” (1p5) and “God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists” (1p11). Chapter 2 (“Spinoza's ‘Ontological’ Argument”) examines Spinoza's arguments in 1p1d for God's necessary existence and the relations among those arguments. Although he agrees with proponents of the traditional ontological argument that one can recognize the logical-metaphysical necessity of God's actual existence simply by understanding the essence of God as expressed in its definition (1d6), he also argues there could not be a sufficient explanation for the existence or non-existence of things—as there must be, on his deepest principles—unless God's essence did entail God's existence in this way. It also seeks to show how he could block the objection that, by parity of reasoning, God could not exist after all because it would have to share attributes with substances of fewer attributes, each of which would also necessarily exist through its own essence. The postscript to this chapter makes several important corrections, including a new analysis of the first of the four “proofs” in 1p1d. It also rebuts an alternative interpretation, due to Michael Della Rocca, of how Spinoza would reject substances of fewer than all attributes. Chapter 3 (“*Ethics* 1p5: Shared Attributes and the Basis of Spinoza's

Monism”) examines Spinoza’s highly compressed argument in 1p5d for the doctrine that substances cannot share attributes. From the premise that each thing is either a substance or a mode of substance, he infers that two substances sharing an attribute must be distinguished either by a difference of attribute or a difference of mode, and he then argues that neither kind of distinction would be possible. The chapter reconstructs a version of Spinoza’s argument that makes it—contrary to initial appearances and two well-known objections—a legitimate inference from his previous definitions and axioms. The postscript following this chapter again rebuts an initially appealing alternative interpretation due to Michael Della Rocca. Chapter 4 (“Spinoza’s Necessitarianism”) argues that Spinoza is fully committed to and consistently maintains the doctrine that every state of affairs is strictly metaphysically necessary, and so could not have been any other way, without restriction. The long postscript to this chapter substantially clarifies and reconfigures my argument for this interpretation by replying in detail to an often-cited article by Edwin Curley and Gregory Walski that criticizes “Spinoza’s Necessitarianism” and proposes an alternative “moderate necessitarian” interpretation. More broadly, however, the postscript answers critics of Spinoza who hold that he cannot coherently regard an eternal and unchanging divine nature as fully necessitating a world of changing things. In doing so, it also investigates such related topics as the “following from” relation, the “infinite individual,” formal essences, ways of conceiving actuality, and the “order of nature.”

Section II: Necessity, Truth, and Knowledge. Spinoza’s strict necessitarianism makes possible a distinctive conception of truth according to which the internal consistency and coherence by which an idea is able to show the genuine possibility of what it represents is at the same time also sufficient to show the actual existence of what it represents. Chapter 5 (“Truth and Ideas of Imagination in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*”) shows how Spinoza’s conception of truth allows him to develop, in an early and unfinished work, a consistent non-Cartesian theory of philosophical method, one that makes room for an investigation of ideas of imagination as a means to the strategic preemption of skeptical doubt. Chapter 6 (“Truth, Method, and Correspondence in Spinoza and Leibniz”) compares the criticisms that Spinoza and Leibniz offer of Descartes’s method of doubt and of his use of “clarity and distinctness” as a sign of truth. It concludes that Leibniz, too, is committed by his principles—though perhaps against his intentions—to a strong form of necessitarianism. Chapter 7 (“Spinoza’s Theory of *Scientia Intuitiva*”) explains in detail the nature and application of Spinoza’s crucial distinction among three kinds of cognition in the *Ethics* (derived from the “four kinds of perception” in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*). In doing so, it shows how the highest kind of cognition—*scientia intuitiva*—can proceed, as Spinoza requires, from knowledge of essences as causes to knowledge of properties as effects in a way that is in principle applicable to every truth whatever.

Section III: Nature as Necessarily Extended and Thinking. In Spinoza's panpsychist version of necessitarian substance monism, everything is both extended and thinking, and the causal order and connection of things precisely parallels the causal order and connection of the ideas of those things—even though extended things and thinking things are characterized by different and even incompatible properties. Chapter 8 ("Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke on Extended Thinking Beings") analyzes the very different ways in which Spinoza and Locke would reject Descartes's two arguments of the *Meditations*—the arguments from separate conception and from divisibility, respectively—against the possibility of things that are both extended and thinking. It finds Spinoza's panpsychist response to Descartes to be especially promising. Chapter 9 ("The Essence of the Body and the Part of the Mind That Is Eternal") resolves three puzzling but central questions about Spinoza's doctrine of the mind's eternity as expressed in *Ethics* Part 5: (1) what the "idea of the formal essence" of the human body is in his metaphysics; (2) how he can hold that the persistence of this idea after the death of the human body renders a part of the mind eternal in a way that is compatible with the parallelism and identity between the mind and body; and (3) how he can hold that increasing one's knowledge renders a greater part of one's mind eternal. Chapter 10 ("The Indiscernibility of Identicals and the Transitivity of Identity in Spinoza's Logic of the Attributes") proposes and defends an interpretation of God's attributes in Spinoza as fundamental manners of existing. This understanding of the attributes, when taken together with his distinctive theory of truth as the adequacy of an idea, finally renders intelligible his apparent flagrant violations of two fundamental logical principles: the Indiscernibility of Identicals and the Transitivity of Identity.

Section IV: Teleology and Necessarily Striving Natures. Substance monism entails that different singular things cannot be individuated or distinguished from one another in virtue of their being different substances, and hence they must be individuated in some other way. Chapter 11 ("Spinoza's Theory of Metaphysical Individuation") analyzes Spinoza's theory of individuation—presented in a lengthy excursus following *Ethics* 2p13s—as a function of relatively self-sustaining "fixed ratios of motion and rest." In doing so, it also offers an interpretation of the metaphysical foundations of his physics in the differential distribution of a force of "motion-and-rest" through an infinite extended substance. Chapter 12 ("Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism") examines the controversial role in Spinoza's philosophy of teleological explanation—that is, explanation by appeal to likely or presumptive consequences, which some commentators have interpreted him as rejecting entirely. It argues that, despite his mechanistic physics, Spinoza's views are in some important ways in closer accord with Aristotle's version of teleology than are the views of either Descartes or Leibniz. Spinoza's key teleological proposition, *Ethics* 3p6, states that each singular thing, "insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being." By elaborating Spinoza's conception of what it

means for something to be “in itself” and the ways in which self-preservatory activity makes a singular thing a kind of “quasi-substance,” Chapter 13 (“Spinoza’s *Conatus* Argument”) provides an original interpretation of that proposition and of his argument for it, one that acquits it of the charge of multiple equivocations that has often been lodged against it.

Section V: Naturalistic Representation and Consciousness. Spinoza offers an account of human minds as integral parts of Nature, one according to which they differ in degree of perfection but not in fundamental metaphysical kind from the minds of all other singular things. Yet the account he offers has many highly counterintuitive consequences: that every singular thing whatever has a mind that perceives everything that happens in its body; that every such perception is also always a perception of external bodies; and that all such perceptions are conscious to at least some degree. Chapter 14 (“Representation and Consciousness in Spinoza’s Naturalistic Theory of the Imagination”) deploys Spinoza’s conceptions of inherence, individuality, conatus, power of thinking (“*cogitandi potentia*”), minds, confusion, and intellection—many of which have been elaborated in chapters of Section IV—in order to explain how he can understand mental representation and consciousness in a way that renders these seemingly counterintuitive consequences plausible. A postscript to this chapter defends its identification of consciousness (“*conscientia*”) with power of thinking (“*cogitandi potentia*”) in Spinoza against (1) an alternative interpretation of consciousness as “complexity” proposed by Steven Nadler and (2) an argument offered by Michael LeBuffe for a significant limitation on that identification. Chapter 15 (“Representation, Misrepresentation, and Error in Spinoza’s Philosophy of Mind”) develops further the interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of mental representation set out in Chapter 14, including its use of the conatus doctrine (that “each thing, insofar as it is in itself strives to persevere in its being”) as explained in Chapter 13. It does so in order to answer two further and challenging questions: (1) how he can limit the primary representational content of a sensory-imaginative idea to only *some* of the causes of the bodily state that is identical with that idea, and (2) how he can reconcile his strict parallelism between things and their ideas with the possibility of misrepresentation and hence of error.

Section VI: Naturalistic Ethics. The ethical theory in which Spinoza’s *Ethics* culminates is a fully naturalistic one grounded in his psychology and formulated largely in terms of the “good” (defined as what is advantageous to persevering in being), “virtue,” the “dictates of reason,” and the model of “the free human being.” Chapter 16 (“‘A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively’: Freedom and the Good in Spinoza’s *Ethics*”) takes up one puzzle about that theory: how Spinoza can maintain in 4p72 that “the free human being” who constitutes our ethical model “always acts honestly” (“*cum fide*”), given that deception can sometimes be advantageous to self-preservation and

hence, by Spinoza's definition "good." The solution, it argues, lies at least in part in the recognition that what is required to achieve an ideal state of being is not always what one would do if one were already in that ideal state. Chapter 17 ("Spinoza's Ethical Theory") provides a more comprehensive analysis of Spinoza's ethics, with particular attention to the derivation of ethics from psychology; the meaning of moral language; motivation by reason; the possibility and moral status of altruism; the role of freedom and responsibility in the context of a necessitarian metaphysics; and the relation of Spinoza's ethics to other ethical traditions. Chapter 18 ("'Promising' Ideas: Hobbes and Contract in Spinoza's Political Philosophy") explains several puzzling features of Spinoza's relation to Hobbes on the topics of promising and contract—especially as Spinoza addresses them in his *Theological-Political Treatise* and his unfinished *Political Treatise*. It does so by analyzing and comparing their doctrines about rights and powers, good and evil, reason and passion, and—especially—faith and deception (*dolus*). Understanding how Spinoza draws on a distinction between "bad deception" (*dolus malus*) and "good deception" (*dolus bonus*) sheds crucial new light on the topic of Chapter 16 as well.

Overview

I

Spinoza's Ethics

THE METAPHYSICS OF BLESSEDNESS

BENEDICT (BARUCH) DE SPINOZA composed the philosophical classic *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (*Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*) over the course of more than a decade while earning his living primarily as a lens-grinder in his native Holland. Although he was rightly cautious about disseminating his radical views—indeed, he traveled to Amsterdam in 1675 to arrange for the publication of the *Ethics*, only to change his mind in response to rumors about the book's "atheism"—he shared his work in draft form with a circle of close friends, who arranged for the publication of the *Ethics* as part of his *Opera Posthuma* in 1677, following his death at the age of forty-four from respiratory disease. The *Ethics* challenged many traditional philosophical conceptions and offered a bold philosophical system—at once a naturalization of the divine and a divinization of nature—that shocked many of his contemporaries but has nevertheless provided intellectual stimulation and inspiration to generations of readers. It remains, more than three centuries later, one of the most remarkable philosophical treatises ever written.

The most immediately striking features of the *Ethics* is its axiomatized "geometrical" format. Spinoza sought to demonstrate his doctrines not only in proper order (that is, in such a way that a conclusion is never employed until the arguments for it have been presented) but also in what he called the "geometrical style." Accordingly, the book is a deductive structure essentially composed—much like Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*—of numbered definitions, axioms, propositions, corollaries, and demonstrations. Within this structure, *definitions* state the intended meanings of key terms; *axioms* state fundamental doctrines proposed for acceptance without demonstration; *propositions* and *corollaries* (which differ only in that the latter are treated as subsidiary to the former) state theses for which *demonstrations* are provided that appeal (almost always) to previously

stated definitions, axioms, propositions, and corollaries. These logical elements are fleshed out by prefaces, notes (*scholia*), and appendices. Spinoza did not always expound his views in the geometrical style; aside from the *Ethics*, he used it extensively in only one of his other works (his first published work, a geometrical reconstruction of parts of Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy* that established his credentials as an interpreter of Descartes). Nor was Spinoza the first to apply this style to philosophical writing; on the contrary, he was inspired to use it at least partly by Descartes's sample geometrical treatment, in his *Objections and Replies*, of some key doctrines of the *Meditations*. The *Ethics* remains, however, the only original philosophical classic of the first rank written "geometrically."

The geometrical format of the *Ethics* serves several closely related purposes for Spinoza. In theory, if not quite always in practice, it imposes a rigorous discipline on the author, requiring him to identify his presuppositions explicitly as axioms and to propound no claims other than these axioms without explicit proof. At the same time, the format imposes a corresponding discipline upon his readers: if they accept the definitions and axioms, and cannot identify a specific fallacy or defect in the reasoning, then they are bound to accept the propositions and corollaries as well, no matter how unpopular those doctrines might be or how strange they might seem. Moreover, the format's demand for austere reasoning—instead of emotional appeals or rhetorical flourishes—helps Spinoza and his readers alike to maintain his desired stance of detached scientific objectivity in considering "human actions and appetites just as if it were a Question of lines, planes, and bodies" (*Ethics* Part 3, Preface).

Even more remarkable than the format of the *Ethics*, however, is its scope. Divided into five parts—"On God," "On the Nature and Origin of the Mind," "On the Origin and Nature of the Affects," "On Human Bondage, or the Powers of the Affects," and "On the Power of the Intellect, or on Human Freedom"—it begins with a proposition about the metaphysical and conceptual priority of a substance over its modes and concludes with a proposition about the nature of blessedness itself. Spinoza's ambition was nothing less than to deduce the nature of blessedness ("man's highest happiness") and the path to it by demonstrating a science of ethics ("knowledge of the right way of living") from the fundamental structure ("metaphysics and physics," as he wrote to a correspondent) of the universe itself. Thus, the metaphysics of Part 1 is meant to support the general theory of matter and mind of Part 2, which supports the account of human nature and the emotions (i.e., "affects") in Part 3; and this account of human nature and the emotions, in turn, supports the ethical theory of Part 4, which supports the explanation of what blessedness is and how it is possible in Part 5. In fact, the *Ethics* offers what might be called a "metaphysics of blessedness" in two quite distinct senses: its metaphysics provides the intended *foundation* for an understanding of what blessedness is and how it is possible; and, in addition, this blessedness

turns out to *consist* largely in understanding that very metaphysics and its many consequences.

Spinoza's Approach to Philosophical Understanding

In order to understand the system that Spinoza proposes, it is helpful first to understand his conception of the nature of *understanding* itself, for it is a conception that underlies his entire approach to philosophy. Spinoza is deeply and irrevocably committed to the idea that all facts can in principle (though not, of course, all within a finite human mind) be conceived or understood through their necessitating causes. This commitment is embedded in Axioms 2–4 of Part 1 of the *Ethics*:

Axiom 2: What cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself.

Axiom 3: From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.

Axiom 4: The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.

Axiom 2 entails that every aspect of reality is conceivable—that is (as Spinoza makes clear), knowable or capable of being understood. Axiom 3 characterizes the causal relation as one of necessitation, in which effects are necessitated by causes and are impossible without them. Finally, Spinoza intends the distinctive Axiom 4 to require that every aspect of reality can be known or understood only through its causes (for although Axiom 4 explicitly applies only to “effects,” his use of the axiom shows clearly that he regards all states of affairs as “effects”). Thus, Spinoza holds that everything can be understood, and can only be understood, by understanding the causes that necessitate its being just as it is. Falling within the scope of this principle are not only all facts about what exists but also all facts about what does not exist. Accordingly, Spinoza writes in his demonstration of the existence of God (Proposition 11 of Part 1): “For each thing, there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence.” That he neglects to cite Axioms 2–4—or any other axiom, definition, proposition, or corollary—as support for this premise of the demonstration is an indication of just how deeply embedded in his thinking the principle is.

An adequate understanding of things through their causes demands, in Spinoza’s view, the use of what he calls *the intellect*. He thus distinguishes between

two different kinds of ideas or mental representations. Whereas ideas of the *imagination* are like sensory images—indeed, for Spinoza, sense perception itself is classified as a kind of imagination in this broad sense—ideas of the *intellect* constitute a higher, more adequate, and nonimagistic form of understanding. Although the distinction between intellect and imagination dates back to the ancient Greeks, its significance was particularly emphasized by those early modern philosophers (including Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Leibniz) who are now commonly classified as “rationalists,” and it was disparaged or ignored by those early modern philosophers (including Locke, Berkeley, and Hume) who are now commonly classified as “empiricists.” For Spinoza, one of the chief aims of philosophical method is to develop reliance on the intellect in preference to the imagination; indeed, one of his earliest works was an unfinished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Precisely because he believes that the intellect provides the mind with a higher and more adequate form of understanding than does the imagination, he holds that sensory observations alone provide an inadequate basis for one’s theories; rather, principles derived from the intellect can and must be used to determine the proper interpretation of what would otherwise be highly inadequate, confused, and unreliable sensory observations. This is one sense, at least, in which Spinoza is indeed a “rationalist.”

Metaphysics

Spinoza employs a substance/mode metaphysics. According to this general metaphysical scheme, the fundamental entities that constitute the universe are *substances*, which are the entities capable of existing independently of other things. Each substance has or is constituted by an *essence* that makes the substance the thing that it is; thus, a substance exists only so long as it retains its essence, and it is best understood through an understanding of that essence. This essence consists of an essential or principal attribute—which Spinoza calls simply an *attribute*. As an expression or further qualification of its essential attribute, each substance has *modes*, which are the qualities or characteristics of the substance; these are all to be understood as determinate modifications of, or particular ways of instancing, the substance’s essential attribute—in the way, for example, that spherical shape is a determinate modification or particular way of instancing spatial dimensionality (which Spinoza calls *extension*). Modes can exist only *in* the substance of which they are modes. It should be emphasized, however, that the relation of *being in* that holds between modes and substances is not a relation of spatial containment nor of parts to wholes; rather, it is intended to be a metaphysical relation of dependence that is exemplified (among other ways) in the relation between qualities of things and the things of which they are qualities.

Although Descartes and many other early modern philosophers also employed this general metaphysical scheme, Spinoza's unique transformation of it provides much of the initial impetus that his philosophy derives from the definitions and axioms of Part 1 of the *Ethics*. For Spinoza, the relation of *being in* necessarily runs in parallel with the relation of *being conceived through*, so that the order of dependence among ideas in thought must correspond precisely to the real order of ontological dependence among the intended objects of thought. Since Spinoza holds (in Axioms 1 and 2 of Part 1) that each thing must be in and conceived through something, and since substances are not in anything other than themselves, he defines a *substance* as that which is *in itself* and *conceived through itself* (Definition 3 of Part 1). He defines a *mode*, in contrast, as whatever is *in another* and *conceived through that other* (Definition 5 of Part 1). He defines an *attribute* (i.e., an essential attribute, or what Descartes called a *principal attribute*) as "what the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence" (Definition 4 of Part 1). From the doctrine of Axiom 4 of Part 1 (already cited) that things must be conceived through their causes, together with the doctrine of the parallelism of the relations of *being in* and *being conceived through*, it follows that whatever is *in* something is also *caused by* it. Hence, for Spinoza, modes must be caused by the substances of which they are modes, and substances themselves must be self-caused.

Perhaps the best-known and most important metaphysical doctrine of the *Ethics* is Spinoza's conclusion that there is only one substance, God. His argument for this conclusion in the demonstration of Proposition 14 of Part 1 invokes two previous propositions of Part 1:

Proposition 5: In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.

Proposition 11: God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, necessarily exists.

Proposition 11's characterization of God as a substance of infinite attributes is just an application of Spinoza's definition of *God* at the beginning of Part 1:

Definition 6: By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each expresses an eternal and infinite essence.

Spinoza's definition of the *infinite* (Definition 2 of Part 1) entails that whatever has *infinite attributes* must have all possible attributes. Hence, the argument runs, since God exists (Proposition 11), all attributes are already present and realized in God; and since substances cannot share attributes (Proposition 5) but must

each have some attribute (to serve as its essence), no substance can exist other than God.

The soundness of this demonstration largely depends, of course, on the two propositions (Propositions 5 and 11) that serve as its premises. The demonstration of Proposition 11 offers several different proofs of God's necessary existence; the first and simplest, however, applies, to the special case of God, Proposition 7's claim that "it pertains to the nature of substance to exist." By this, Spinoza means that every possible substance must have a nature such that it could not possibly fail to exist, so that the existence of any possible substance follows immediately and with logical necessity from any definition of the substance that properly states its nature or essence. That this kind of necessary and eternal existence must indeed be a feature of any possible substance can be seen most easily from the fact that every substance is, by definition, conceived through itself and so also the cause of itself; for a thing could cause itself (as Definition 1 of Part 1 affirms) only if it pertained to the thing's own nature to exist, so that its nonexistence would be inconceivable and impossible. Of course, since it pertains to the nature of any possible substance to exist and since no substance other than God actually exists, according to Spinoza, it follows for him that no other substance than God is really even so much as possible; any attempted definition of another substance must contain either an explicit or a hidden contradiction, consisting in the attempt to specify something as *substance*, and so entirely independent of other things, while nevertheless limiting its number of attributes and hence also its power.

Spinoza's demonstration of Proposition 5 (that substances cannot share attributes) is highly compressed. Its strategy, however, is reasonably clear: to argue that there could be no *conceivable*—and hence no *genuine*—distinction between two substances sharing the same attribute, on the grounds that they could be distinguished as two different substances sharing that attribute neither by appeal to the attribute itself (which by hypothesis is the same in each) nor by appeal to any difference in their modes of that attribute. They could not differ in their modes because modes are subsequent (by Proposition 1 of Part 1) to the substance of which they are modes. That is, they are entirely in and conceived through (by Definitions 3 and 5), and hence entirely caused by (in consequence of Axiom 4), the substance of which they are modes. But to be conceived through and caused by a substance is to be conceived through and caused by its attribute. Accordingly, there could be no conceiving of a difference of modes that did not require conceiving a preexisting difference in the attribute of which they were modes. In thus denying that two substances could share an essential attribute, Spinoza is rejecting a key part of Descartes's metaphysics. According to Descartes, all human minds are substances that share the essential attribute of *thought* (understood broadly enough to include emotion and volition), and all bodies are substances that share the essential attribute of *extension* (i.e., spatial dimensionality). Descartes could allow that

there are substances that share an essential attribute yet differ in modes partly because he accepted the possibility of causal interaction between substances, so that the modes of a substance need not all be causally determined entirely by their substance's own essential attribute; Spinoza's conception of substance requires that he deny the possibility of such interaction and hence also the possibility of such a resulting difference of modes.

In traditional Western philosophical theology, God is regarded as a substance or being distinct from the natural world, which consists of God's many creatures. Spinoza's *substance monism*—the doctrine that there is only one substance—demands a different account of the relation between God and Nature in general and a different account of the relation between God and his creatures—including individual minds and bodies—in particular. In the context of his substance/mode metaphysics, Spinoza's doctrine that God is the only substance entails that everything that exists is either God or a mode of God; thus, as Spinoza expresses it in Proposition 15, "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God." It follows that if Nature is to be conceived as a substance, Nature must be identical with God—hence Spinoza's famous phrase "God, or Nature" ("*Deus, sive Natura*"), a phrase that has contributed to the common but reactionary imputation of concealed atheism to the *Ethics*. Since particular things are not themselves individually identical with God, for Spinoza, they must be modes of God, as he explicitly confirms in the Corollary to Proposition 25 of Part I: "Particular things are nothing but affections [i.e., qualities or modifications] of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way."

Understandably, Spinoza's assertion that human beings and other particular things are not really substances in their own right but are instead modes of substance evokes approval from some readers and consternation from others. Edwin Curley (1969, 1988, 1991) has sought, in his interpretation of the *Ethics*, to reduce the element of consternation by emphasizing the cause/effect implications and minimizing the subject/quality implications of the substance/mode relation. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to avoid reading the *Ethics* as claiming that modes of extension, including particular bodies, are ways in which God is extended and that modes of thought, including particular minds, are ways in which God is thinking. Jonathan Bennett (1984, 1991, 2001) has argued that one should see Spinoza's assertion that particular things are modes of a single substance as an early forerunner of the "field metaphysic" of contemporary physics—that is, the view according to which the universe is not, at the ultimate level, a composite of ontologically independent elementary particles but is instead a unitary being, a medium in which particular individual "things" arise as and ultimately consist of varying and moving distributions of different forces, properties, or fields that qualify or modify regions of that permanent medium.

Spinoza's view of the relation of God to Nature is often characterized as *pantheism*—that is, as the doctrine that everything is God. This characterization is not unwarranted, for Spinoza does hold that every substance is God. Some commentators, however, have preferred to call his doctrine *panentheism*, intending by this coinage to emphasize his doctrine that everything (including God Itself) is *in* God, so that different particular things are only modes of God and are not themselves identical with God. Although Spinoza is also often described as holding that everything is a part of God, this characterization is not accurate, since for him modes are not parts: wholes are ontologically dependent on the existence of their parts, which bring wholes into existence by composing them; a substance, in contrast, is ontologically prior to its modes, which are modifications, or “affections,” of the substance that follow from its essence.

Spinoza's reconception of the relation between God and Nature demands a reconsideration of the question of how God acts. Traditional Western philosophical theology holds that God (i) created a world distinct from Himself, (ii) choosing to do so without acting from necessity, (iii) in order to achieve some good. As has already been observed, Spinoza denies the first element of this theory. According to him, all of God's causal activity is *immanent* causation (Proposition 18 of Part 1): the production of modes that are *in* rather than external to God. According to Spinoza, some of these modes—the *infinite modes*—are pervasive and eternal features of God; the others, including such individual things as human beings, are *finite modes* that exist locally rather than pervasively, and come into and pass out of existence. While all modes of God have real causal power, on Spinoza's view, their causal power is not distinct from or in addition to God's own infinite power, since they are not themselves substances external to God.

Spinoza equally rejects the second element of the traditional theory of God's causal activity, for he denies that God *chooses* to act and he affirms that God acts from absolute necessity. Spinoza's God does not in any sense choose from among alternatives, for his God conceives of no alternatives. Because he holds that everything must be conceivable through necessitating causes, Spinoza is a *necessitarian*; that is, he holds that everything true is so necessarily, and that nothing could possibly have been otherwise than it is. God could not possibly have had an essence different from the essence that God actually has, he argues; for God is by definition the absolutely infinite or unlimited substance, and it necessarily pertains to the nature of just such a substance to exist with the most unlimited nature or essence. Furthermore, everything that is genuinely conceivable or possible must follow with absolute causal necessity from that essence (Proposition 16, Proposition 29, and Proposition 33 of Part 1, with demonstrations and *scholia*), for an absolutely infinite nature must cause everything that is possible to exist, and causes necessitate absolutely. Despite this, however, God is *free* in Spinoza's own sense of the term, according to which a thing is free if it “exists from the necessity

of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone” (Definition 7 of Part 1). God satisfies this definition, for Spinoza, because the causal necessity by which God exists and acts is entirely internal to God’s own essential nature; indeed, there is nothing outside God by which it could be imposed.

Spinoza rejects the third element of the traditional theory of divine causal activity as well: his God acts for the sake of no end or good. If God were to act in order to achieve some end, Spinoza argues in the Appendix to Part 1, that would only show that God desired something that he lacked and so (contrary to Definition 6 of Part 1) was not absolutely infinite. For Spinoza, all goodness is relative: something is *good for* a thing if it benefits that thing. Since nothing can benefit or harm God, it follows that nothing is good or evil for God—even though many things are, of course, good or evil for human beings. Because Spinoza’s God has no desires and acts with no end in view, his God does not act in order to benefit human beings, is neither pleased nor displeased by their actions, and has no interest in being worshipped by them. Although Spinoza’s God is an infinite thinking—and also an infinite extended—thing, his God is in no sense a *person*. Accordingly, the traditional problem of how a perfectly benevolent God could permit evils to befall human beings simply does not arise for Spinoza.

Theories of Matter and Mind

In Cartesian metaphysics, extension and thought are each essential attributes—some created substances (*bodies*, in the broad sense encompassing all physical objects) have the former, and other created substances (*minds*) have the latter. Descartes’s God thinks but is not extended. If there is only one substance, as Spinoza maintains, then what is to become of thought and extension as essential attributes? Spinoza’s bold answer is that they are *both* essential attributes of the one substance, God. Spinoza conceives of thought and extension as two fundamentally different kinds of God’s being—that is, as two fundamentally different manners in which God, the absolutely infinite being, exists. Just as God is an infinite thinking being whose thinking nature is expressed through the being of infinitely many—that is, all possible—modes of thought, so God is also and equally an infinite extended being whose extended nature is expressed through the being of infinitely many—that is, all possible—modes of extension. God is thus both *Res Extensa* (*the Extended Thing*) and *Res Cogitans* (*the Thinking Thing*). The essence of *Res Extensa* is extension; the essence of *Res Cogitans* is thought; extension and thought are each the essence of God, insofar as God is conceived in the one manner or the other. In fact, God’s attributes are not limited to extension and thought, on Spinoza’s view, for God has, by definition, infinite attributes. All possible attributes of God must also be possessed and conceived by God; however,

Spinoza maintains that no attributes in addition to extension and thought can be conceived by a human mind. Because every attribute is a fundamental manner of being, none can be conceived through the conception of any other, and no mode of one can be conceived through any mode of any other; the attributes are conceptually, and hence also causally, closed and self-contained. Thus, for example, each fact of extension is conceived through and caused by only facts of extension, not by facts of thought; and each fact of thought is conceived through and caused by only facts of thought, not by facts of extension (Propositions 5 and 6 of Part 2).

Since Spinoza's God is an infinite thinking thing, however, there is nevertheless in God an actual idea of each thing that actually exists; and since each thing must be conceived through its causes (Axiom 4 of Part 1), the causal order of dependence among things is mirrored by the causal order of dependence among their ideas. Thus, Spinoza affirms a strict but noncausal parallelism between things and ideas: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (Proposition 7 of Part 2). Nor is this all; he holds not only that a mode of extension is always paralleled by a corresponding mode of thought having that mode of extension as its object; he also holds that a mode of extension is *identical* with the mode of thought that has it as its object (*scholium* to Proposition 7 of Part 2). Thus, just as extension and thought are two different manners of being through which one and the same substance, God, causes Itself to exist and conceives Itself, so also they provide two different manners in which each particular mode of God is caused to exist and can be conceived.

This theory of the relation between extension and thought in general provides the basis for Spinoza's account of the relation between the human body and the human mind in particular: the mind of a human being is the complex idea having that human being's body as its object, and hence the human mind and the human body are the very same thing, expressed under different attributes. The human body is a local and temporary expression of God's own infinite extension; and the human mind is the corresponding, and indeed identical, local and temporary aspect of God's own infinite thought. Spinoza's substance monism entails that the human mind is not a substance in its own right, engaged in thinking ideas that are numerically distinct from God's ideas; instead, Spinoza holds that each human mind is a complex idea contained within God's infinite intellect (Corollary to Proposition 11 of Part 2), so that ideas in a human mind are literally shared with God. The human mind is, as it were, some of God's own knowledge—namely, God's knowledge insofar as it constitutes knowledge specifically of that human body, or God's knowledge of things from the limited perspective of that human body. When a mind has ideas of things together with the ideas of their causes, the mind has ideas that are *adequate* and *true*—ideas of the intellect—and it understands in just the same way that God does. When the mind has ideas of things without the ideas of their causes, it has *inadequate* and *false* ideas, ideas

of the imagination, and the mind's understanding is mutilated and confused in comparison with God's more comprehensive and complete understanding, which does include ideas of these causes. All ideas by their nature involve an affirmation of their content, according to Spinoza (Proposition 49 of Part 2). He therefore denies Descartes's doctrine that a mind can sometimes choose whether to affirm or deny the content of its ideas; instead, the mind will necessarily affirm that content unless it also has other ideas that necessarily lead the mind to reject it.

Human Nature and the Emotions

Spinoza's account of human nature and the emotions is the result of conjoining his general conception of the nature of finite beings with his theory of the distinguishing features of human beings. This account is often called his "psychology," and this designation is not entirely erroneous; but it is misleading if it is taken to imply that his account concerns only the mental, or the realm of thought, for on Spinoza's conception of the emotions, they are equally modes of thought and of extension (Definition 3 of Part 3).

Although Spinoza asserts clearly and emphatically that there is only one genuine substance, he does not deny that some modes of this substance, including human beings, are what we may also properly call *things*—that is, proper subjects for the ascription of qualities in their own right. Modes of God qualify as *things* to the extent that they constitute a (finite) approximation to the nature of a (necessarily infinite) substance. Since substance is, for Spinoza, entirely self-caused, something is a *thing* to the extent that it approximates to being self-caused—i.e., to the extent that it constitutes the sufficient necessitating explanation for its own existence. Of course, no finite mode is eternal, and so every finite mode must be brought into existence originally by something other than itself; but a finite mode can nonetheless be a cause of its own *continued* existence to the extent that it exerts causal power to *maintain* itself in existence. Hence, as Spinoza claims in Proposition 6 of Part 3, "Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being." His argument for his doctrine that all things have a striving (*conatus*) for self-preservation offers a good example of his "rationalistic" method. He justifies the doctrine not on the basis of extensive observation—although he no doubt thinks that it is confirmed by observation—but rather on the basis of a consideration of the conditions for being a *thing*—that is, for being *substance-like*—at all. The more something constitutes a finite approximation to a genuine infinite substance, the more power it will have and exert to preserve itself in being. For a finite thing truly to *act* (i.e., to be active) is for it to be the cause of effects through its own essential endeavor to persevere in being (Definition 2 and Proposition 7 of Part 3).

Like all things in nature, human beings strive to persevere in their being, according to Spinoza; but they differ from most other things in three related respects. First, like some other animals but unlike other beings, they have highly complex bodies that are capable of forming, retaining, and utilizing (for purposes of self-preservation) relatively distinct *images* of things. That is to say, they have highly developed sense organs that provide them with imaginative (including sensory) representations of the world. These representations, considered as modes of the attribute of thought, are ideas of states of the human being's own body, states that own a considerable part of their natures to—and hence also represent, although incompletely and inadequately—states or qualities of external things. Second, because human beings are such complex mechanisms, they are not only capable of exerting considerable power for self-preservation, they are also capable of undergoing increases and decreases in the amount of power for self-preservation they possess. Third, and most distinctively, as they increase their capacity for active self-preservation, they are capable not only of imagination but also of a considerable degree of conscious intellection—that is, of consciously forming adequate ideas of things.

The nature of human beings thus makes them susceptible to three basic emotions, or *affects*, which are “affections of the Body by which the Body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and at the same time, the ideas of those affections” (Definition 3 of Part 3). The first of these basic emotions is *desire*, which is the basic endeavor toward self-preservation as it becomes directed toward some particular object that a human being represents to itself. The second is *joy* (*laetitia*), which is an increase in self-preservatory power for action. The third is *sadness* (*tristitia*), which is a decrease in self-preservatory power for action. Desires and joys can be either passions or active emotions, but sadness can only be a passion. Spinoza catalogs and explains the enormous variety of other human emotions as particular combinations or kinds of these three basic emotions insofar as they have various causes and objects. Whenever an emotion is caused by external forces of one kind or another, it is a *passion*; when it results entirely from the human being's own power, it is an *active emotion*.

Ethical Theory

This description of human nature and emotions raises, and at the same time provides Spinoza with much of his basis for answering, the question of what the right kind of life for a human being is. He firmly rejects legalistic conceptions of ethics, according to which the right way of living is determined by conformity to a code specifying that some actions or omissions of actions are obligatory while others are impermissible: “Absolutely, it is permissible for everyone to do, by the

highest right of nature, what he judges will contribute to his advantage” (Article 8 of the Appendix to Part 4). Although citizenship is properly concerned with obedience to laws enacted by the State, ethics for Spinoza is concerned not with edicts of permission and obligation but with discovering the *best* way of living. Popular religion, he believes, errs in conceiving of ethics as a matter of obedience to the *positive commands* of an anthropomorphized and monarchical God, when in fact true ethics requires understanding not divine commands but rather the *natural laws* governing human well-being or advantage. For the *best* way of living is that which maximizes one’s advantage—that is, one’s good—and thereby achieves that for which (as Spinoza has argued in Part 3 of the *Ethics*) every human being naturally and necessarily strives—namely, the preservation of his or her being. Since the preservation of one’s being must be everyone’s goal as a matter of metaphysical necessity, no one can consistently deny that it constitutes his or her good. Accordingly, there is no need for an ethics that externally commands or enjoins; for to know ethics is simply to understand adequately where one’s true advantage or good lies (i.e., what will truly preserve one’s being), and the very ideas that constitute this true knowledge will necessarily also constitute emotions of desire for what is known to be one’s good. Spinoza does not, of course, deny (indeed, he emphasizes) that human beings frequently desire what is not really good for them; but he does hold that this occurs only through their having inadequate ideas of things, ideas which manifest their own lack of power to understand more adequately. Such desires are passions, external perversions of the natural direction of human *conatus*. Subjection to passions is what Spinoza calls *human bondage*; and it is the task of ethics to show how such bondage may be overcome.

Spinoza uses four closely related concepts to express his specific ethical doctrines. The first of these is the concept of *the good*—that is, the concept of that which is useful in the endeavor to persevere in one’s being (Definition 1 of Part 4), or (equivalently for Spinoza) that which aids one in “approaching the model of human nature that we set before ourselves” (Preface to Part 4). The second concept is that of *virtue*, which he regards as identical to that of *power* (Definition 8 of Part 4). The third concept is that of *guidance of reason* or *dictate of reason*, which signifies what one does insofar as one understands things adequately. The fourth is the concept of *the free man*, which is the concept of a model of human nature that we properly strive to exemplify. Part 4 of the *Ethics* offers a number of specific claims about what is good or evil, what one does from virtue, how one acts under the guidance of reason, and (in its final propositions) the nature and behavior of the free man. The last three concepts are, in fact, practically equivalent. Although only God absolutely satisfies Spinoza’s definition of *freedom*, human beings can approximate more or less closely to doing so: to act freely—that is, to be determined from one’s own nature alone—is to be the adequate cause of one’s own perseverance in being. To whatever extent human beings act freely, however, they

also exert their own power—that is, their virtue. Moreover, one acts freely, or from one’s own power or virtue, just to the extent that one has adequate ideas and so is guided by reason, for only to the extent that one’s ideas are adequate are they the result of one’s own power rather than one’s weakness and the impositions of external forces. The good is therefore equivalently whatever enables us to become free, virtuous, or guided by reason.

Although its basis is undeniably egoistic, the ethical theory that Spinoza provides in these terms is nevertheless a cooperative rather than a competitive one. This is because “knowledge of God is the Mind’s greatest good” (Proposition 28 of Part 4), and this good “can be enjoyed equally by all” (Proposition 36 of Part 4), for someone’s acquiring it leaves no less for others. On the contrary, Spinoza holds that nothing is more useful to a human being in the pursuit of knowledge than the genuine friendship of other human beings. Spinoza argues that knowledge is the highest good on the grounds that what each individual thing strives to achieve in order to persevere in being must be its good, and the human mind’s endeavor to persevere in its being is nothing other than its endeavor to realize understanding (Demonstration of Proposition 26). For Spinoza, of course, *knowledge of God* is not distinct from knowledge of other things; because God is the only substance, all knowledge is really knowledge of God.

The content of Spinoza’s ethical theory thus emphasizes the joy (i.e., increase in self-preservatory power for action) that consists in the achievement of adequate—that is, intellectual—understanding, understanding that allows one to acquire further adequate understanding and to live freely and virtuously under the guidance of reason. Those who come to understand the divine nature as it manifests itself in the natural world and in human life will remain undisturbed by reverses, Spinoza thinks, and will not be tormented by “what ifs,” for they will understand that what occurs must occur of necessity and could not have failed to occur. Blame and disapprobation for others are species of hatred, which is a form of sadness; hence, those who are virtuous and free are less subject to these passions and instead pursue the joy of understanding in fellowship through the resources provided by the knowledge that they already enjoy. To the extent that they are virtuous and free, they also do not feel pity, humility, or repentance, for these, too, are all species of sadness. They do not even fear their own dissolution, for “a free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is meditation on life, not on death” (Proposition 67 of Part 4).

Blessedness

As will be apparent from the foregoing sketch, Spinoza seems to provide two quite different and seemingly conflicting conceptions of the nature of the good for a

human being. On the one hand, it consists, as it does for all things, in persevering in existence—that is, in not ceasing to exist (as is confirmed in Proposition 39 of Part 4). On the other hand, it consists in adequate understanding (as emphasized in Proposition 27 of Part 4). Yet humans and other beings often continue in existence for many years in relative ignorance; and adequate understanding of things, while sometimes useful in avoiding or forestalling death, is nevertheless frequently accompanied by an early demise—as it was in Spinoza’s own case. Part 5 of the *Ethics* serves, in part, to reconcile these seemingly conflicting conceptions by showing how adequate understanding constitutes a higher kind of perseverance in being even when it does not lengthen the duration of one’s biological life. In doing so, it also explains what true blessedness is and how it is possible that human beings achieve it.

Because of his doctrine that the human mind is identical with the human body, Spinoza’s philosophy offers no prospect of an afterlife in which an individual human mind continues to experience and remember its earlier experiences without the existence of its body; the death of the finite body must equally be the death of the finite mind. Nevertheless, he argues that an important *part* of the human mind is eternal (Proposition 39 of Part 5). This part is the intellect (Corollary to Proposition 40 of Part 5). For the intellect, as distinguished from the imagination, consists of adequate ideas of pervasive and eternal features of the universe that are not dependent on the particular perspective of a particular human being. These very ideas (and not merely ideas similar in content) are therefore in God, not only insofar as he constitutes a particular human body, but also eternally and pervasively. They did not come into existence with a particular human being, and they will not go out of existence with that human being. Rather, some of the very ideas that are eternal in God’s infinite intellect come also to be included, with greater or less conscious power of thinking, in the mind of a particular human being during that human being’s lifetime. The greater the extent to which the intellect dominates the imagination of a particular human being, the more he or she understands the universe from an eternal, rather than a local, perspective, and the greater the part of his or her mind that *remains*—although not, of course, *as* his or her mind—after death. Eternal life is not, for Spinoza, something that a human being achieves after death; rather, it is an eternal way of being in which the intellect allows a human being to participate while he or she is alive. Yet, because it is at once the maximization of one’s present being and a participation in the eternal, it constitutes the highest kind of perseverance in being of which human beings are capable.

To improve one’s intellect is to participate in God’s eternal intellect, on Spinoza’s view, but it is also something more: it is to participate in God’s blessedness itself. Whenever a human being acquires adequate understanding, this event is an increase in his or her power for action (because it facilitates further

understanding) and so constitutes active joy while at the same time giving power over the passions. To the extent that one understands that God is the ultimate cause of this joy, it will be (by the definition of *love* in the *Scholium* to Proposition 13 of Part 3) a *love of God*. This intellectual love of God, like everything else that exists, must itself be in God; and hence there is, in some sense, an “emotional” as well as an intellectual character to God’s thought. Speaking loosely, Spinoza states that this intellectual love of God is a share of the very love with which God (through a mode constituting a human being) loves Itself (Proposition 36 of Part 5) and with which God loves (as modes of Itself) human beings (Corollary to Proposition 36). But the emotion that human beings experience as love cannot literally be joy or love *on the part of God* as God, since God is eternally and absolutely perfect; an increase in power for action on the part of a finite mode of God is not an increase in God’s own power for action. God’s eternal perfection, of which human joy is a temporally occurring manifestation, is what Spinoza calls “blessedness.” To the extent that a human being participates in the eternal perspective, not merely *increasing* capacity for action but enjoying its already eternal perfection, he or she participates in divine blessedness. This blessedness is not, as popular religion would have it, an externally bestowed reward for obedience and restraint of our corrupt natures; as Spinoza says in the final proposition of the *Ethics*, “Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; nor do we enjoy it because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to restrain them” (Proposition 42 of Part 5). Instead, the achievement of Spinozistic blessedness consists in adequate philosophical and scientific knowledge of God-or-Nature—including the very kind of knowledge that makes it possible to understand what blessedness is and how it is possible. It is a fitting kind of salvation for a philosopher who sought to break down the dichotomy between the natural and the divine.

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SECTION I

Necessity and God's Nature

Spinoza's "Ontological" Argument

PROPOSITION XI OF Part I of Spinoza's *Ethics* is the claim that "God or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists." Spinoza employs four proofs to establish this important proposition, but it is far from obvious how they are to be construed. Almost the only point on which commentators agree is that the proofs include an ontological argument—and even in this, I believe, they are somewhat mistaken. I hope to show that Spinoza is best understood as offering four interrelated arguments which resemble ontological arguments in being essentially a priori and relying on a definition of "God," but which resemble cosmological arguments in depending on a version of the principle of sufficient reason. After some preliminaries, I will discuss the four proofs in order, showing how they rely on the principle of sufficient reason and how they relate to each other. The last two proofs, it will be seen, serve partly to forestall an objection which can be raised about the generalizability of the first two. Finally, I will discuss the implications of Spinoza's proofs and their relation to traditional ontological and cosmological arguments.

I

Standard interpretations. First, let us briefly consider two prominent interpretations of the proofs of Proposition XI. Harry Wolfson proposes that the proofs should be reduced to trivial "analytical syllogisms." He reconstructs the first proof, for example, as follows:

If we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being whose essence involves existence, then God is immediately perceived by us to exist.

But we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being whose essence involves existence.

Therefore, God is immediately perceived by us to exist.¹

The second and fourth proofs are rendered similarly with "God as a being whose essence involves existence" being replaced by "God as a being whose existence is necessary by His own nature" and "God as a being of the highest power," respectively; the third proof Wolfson regards as straightforwardly cosmological. According to Wolfson, the first, second, and fourth proofs simply report that we have an immediate rational perception or intuition of God's existence, and then claim that such an intuition is veridical. A variant of Wolfson's view is developed by William Earle, who maintains that Spinoza's entire discussion of Proposition XI "may not be an argument at all," but that it does express an "intellectual intuition" (in the Kantian sense) of God's essence and necessary existence.² On the Wolfson-Earle view, Spinoza is essentially reporting, rather than arguing, that we have or can have an experience of God's nature in which we rationally perceive His existence as necessitated by His essence. Nevertheless, both Wolfson and Earle claim that we should regard Spinoza as giving an "ontological argument," and both are willing to make this claim for the same reason. Wolfson argues, and Earle implies, that ontological arguments, properly understood, *never* do more than report, analyze, and elucidate such a rational perception.

This interpretation has something to recommend it. There is good evidence in Spinoza's writings that he regards such an experience as the best way to come to know of God's existence. In the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, for example, he maintains that the best method of epistemology would be to begin, before all else, with the clear and distinct idea of God, an idea which makes it clear that God exists. Yet in the *Ethics*, Spinoza does not simply invite us to reflect upon this idea until God's existence becomes certain. As Earle admits, Spinoza certainly *seems* to provide arguments for Proposition XI. And these apparent arguments have the following property: not a single premise or conclusion of Wolfson's "analytical syllogisms" about our experience occurs anywhere among them. An interpretation which could account more plausibly for Spinoza's argumentation is therefore to be preferred.

H. H. Joachim does claim to find a full-blooded argument in Proposition XI, and seeks to explain the difficulty philosophers have had in agreeing about it as due to the fact that it contains a missing premise. He writes:

Except in the third proof, Spinoza has not expressly supplied the minor premise for this reasoning and hence he has been misunderstood. The cogency of the argument depends upon the unexpressed postulate that "something—at any rate some contingent modal being, some being which therefore implies self-determined or substantial being—does exist." But this is a postulate which assuredly does not require explicit statement. For

deny that anything in any sense is, and in your denial you assert at least your own existence.³

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

I agree that, when his tacit premises are included, Spinoza's arguments are valid; but I disagree as to what their premises are. Spinoza does employ a largely unexpressed "postulate." It is easy to see, however, that this postulate cannot be the claim that something or other exists. Spinoza calls the third proof of Proposition XI a *posteriori* because it relies on the proposition that "we ourselves exist." According to Joachim, it is the certainty of this proposition which underlies the certainty of the more general claim that something or other exists: we can know that something or other exists before we know that God exists chiefly because each of us knows himself to exist. But Spinoza clearly regards the other three proofs as *a priori*, as Joachim himself remarks.⁴ If Spinoza had meant them to rely upon a tacit premise that we exist, or upon the more general premise that some contingent being exists, then presumably he would have regarded them as a *posteriori* as well. One does not make a *posteriori* argument into an *a priori* one by making all of the empirically-supported premises tacit. (As we shall see later, Spinoza is entitled to take the proposition that something or other exists as *a priori*—but this follows only with the tacit premise which I attribute to him, and does not follow from any claim which Joachim ascribes to him.) It is in fact very odd that Joachim persists in calling the arguments "ontological" while attributing to them a missing premise to the effect that something or other exists—the sort of premise which constitutes the essential feature of cosmological arguments. It is not at all surprising, on the other hand, that an essentially cosmological argument should be found to escape Kant's criticism of ontological arguments.

For the reasons cited, and others as well, neither the Joachim interpretation nor the Wolfson-Earle interpretation is satisfactory as an account of Spinoza's intentions. Nevertheless, each of them is partly right. Although Spinoza's arguments do not employ the premise Joachim proposes, they do rely on a largely tacit premise, and they do bear important resemblances to cosmological arguments. Like many cosmological arguments, they rely on a principle of sufficient reason. And although the arguments for Proposition XI are neither trivial nor based on the report of a personal experience, Wolfson and Earle are clearly correct when they say that Spinoza believes it is possible to know of God's existence by means of a "rational perception" of His essence. As we shall see, however,

Spinoza's strategy is to give a set of original—and nonexperiential—arguments to show that such an experience is possible.

II

Definitions. Before turning to the proofs themselves, a few words must be said about the terms “cause,” “effect,” “cause of itself,” and “essence involving existence,” as they occur in the Axioms and Definitions. Axiom III of Part I of the *Ethics* reads:

From a given determinate cause an effect necessarily follows; and, on the other hand, if no determinate cause be given, it is impossible that an effect can follow.

“X causes Y,” in Spinoza's usage, is best understood as meaning “X provides (at least part of) the reason for the being or nature of Y.” Spinoza mentions several kinds of causation (immanent, transient, efficient, proximate, and remote), several kinds of things which can be causes (individual things, infinite and eternal modes, and substance itself), and several kinds of things which can be effects (existences, essences, and actions); but this is the central meaning these uses share. If we read Spinoza's term “effect” liberally, as “state of affairs,” Axiom III then claims that the full reason or explanation of a state of affairs must constitute a sufficient condition for it, and that no state of affairs can lack such a reason; in other words, that a sufficient reason can be given why everything should be as it is. This claim can fairly be called a principle of sufficient reason. On the other hand, if we read “effect” more strictly, as “state of affairs having a cause,” then Axiom III makes a more trivial claim, one which must be supplemented by the claim that every state of affairs is an effect in order to provide us with a principle of sufficient reason.

There are several reasons for adopting the former, more liberal, interpretation of “effect.” Doing so permits us to find a basis in the Axioms for claims that Spinoza makes later; furthermore, adopting the stricter interpretation renders Axiom III analytic in a way that would make it more suited to being a Definition than to being an Axiom. But it is difficult to be certain how Axiom III is intended, since, curiously enough, it is cited by number only once—at Proposition XXVII—and then in a way consistent with either interpretation. I will, nevertheless, refer to the principle that every state of affairs has a sufficient reason or explanation as “Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason.” For it is clear that Spinoza does *believe* every state of affairs to have a cause, even if he does not intend to make this claim in the Axioms.⁵ It is equally clear that he cites a corollary of this principle—the corollary that there is a sufficient reason or cause for each of those states of

affairs which consists of the existence or nonexistence of a particular thing—in Proposition XI, and that he employs the corollary in his effort to prove the existence of God.

According to Definition I of Part I, the expression "cause of itself" is to denote those things whose essences "involve existence" or which "cannot be conceived not to exist." The two parts of this definition provide logical and psychological ways, respectively, of describing logically necessary existence. It is not obvious that having an "essence involving existence" should entail having logically necessary existence, but that is the case for Spinoza. He insists that an adequate definition should capture the essence of the thing defined; it follows that a being whose essence involves existence will be one whose existence follows from its definition. Indeed, Spinoza expressly states, in Section 97 of the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, that the definition of an uncreated (that is, self-caused) being must leave "no room for doubt as to whether the thing exists or not." Any being whose existence follows in such a way from definitions alone may fairly be said to exist as a matter of logical necessity. Axiom VII of Part I later assures us that everything meeting the logical condition—having an essence involving existence—will also meet the psychological condition: its nonexistence will be inconceivable. Thus, self-causation is identified in Definition I with logically necessary existence.⁶ It is also logically necessary existence that Spinoza intends when he speaks simply of "necessary existence"; this is shown by his definitions of "necessary existence" as existence whose denial implies a contradiction, in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (Section 53) and the *Ethics* (Book I Proposition XXXIII).

The first proof. We can now outline the first proof of Proposition XI. It argues that if God's existence were not necessary, then His nonexistence would be inconceivable, in which case, by Axiom VII, His essence would not involve existence. But, Spinoza reminds us, Proposition VII states that the essence of a substance does "involve existence, or, in other words, it pertains to its nature to exist." And the definition of "God" (given in Definition VI) is the definition of a substance. Hence, God's nonexistence cannot be conceivable, and His existence must be necessary. We may summarize the argument as follows (note that the first premise does not follow from any of Spinoza's earlier claims unless, as I argued, he identifies self-causation with necessary existence):

- (1) If a thing does not exist necessarily, then its nonexistence is conceivable.
[From Definition I and the identification of self-causation with necessary existence]
- (2) If the nonexistence of a thing is conceivable, then its essence does not involve existence.
[Axiom VII]

- (3) God is defined as a substance.
[From Definition VI]
- (4) The essence of a substance involves existence.
[Proposition VII]
- (5) God exists necessarily.

From premises (1)–(4), Spinoza constructs a *reductio ad absurdum* for the conclusion. The form of the argument is dictated by two considerations: Spinoza's expressed preference for *reductio* arguments, and his desire to utilize both of the alternative definitions of "cause of itself" given in Definition I. If it were not for these considerations, he could just as well infer directly from premises (3) and (4) that God's essence involves existence; and from this, Definition I, and the identification of self-causation with necessary existence, he could infer that God's existence is necessary. In this way, he could preserve the fundamental nature of the proof without the need to mention inconceivability or Axiom VII.

Proposition VII. Clearly, the heart of the first proof is Proposition VII, the proposition that "it pertains to the nature of substance to exist." Proposition VII is demonstrated by arguing that since a substance cannot be produced by another thing (by the Corollary of Proposition VI), a substance must be the cause of itself, and so (by Definition I) have an essence involving existence.

To argue in this manner is undeniably to assume that no being exists without a cause, that is, without a reason or explanation. Even if this consequence of Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason is granted, however, it follows only that every actually *existing* substance is self-caused, and so has an essence involving existence. For a possible substance might fail to have some other thing for its cause, and fail to be the cause of itself, and yet not be existing-without-a-cause—by not existing at all. But the conclusion that the essence of every existing substance involves existence would be too weak for Spinoza's purposes; if Proposition VII, and hence premise (4), meant only this, the first proof of Proposition XI could show only that *if* God exists at all, *then* He exists necessarily. If the first proof is to be valid, Proposition VII must mean that all *possible* substances have essences involving existence. Yet that conclusion does not follow from the argument actually given for Proposition VII, even when it is taken together with the additional premise that no being can exist without a reason or cause.

Perhaps it is because he senses this apparent lacuna that Joachim is led to insist that Spinoza relies on an existential premise. But no such premise is needed to supplement Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason, as the second proof of Proposition XI makes clear. As he there reminds us, the nonexistence of a thing,

the noninstantiation of an essence, is also an effect for Spinoza, and as such requires a reason or cause. His version of the principle of sufficient reason is strong enough to entail that everything which exists has a cause for its existence and that everything which fails to exist has a cause for its nonexistence. Let us add this corollary of Spinoza's strong principle of sufficient reason to his two explicit premises for Proposition VII:

- (6) Nothing can cause the existence of a substance other than the substance itself.
[Corollary of Proposition VI]
- (7) If a thing is the cause of itself, then its essence involves existence.
[From Definition I]
- (8) For everything (existing or not existing) there must be a cause either of its existence (if it exists) or of its non-existence (if it does not).
[From Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason; this corollary is stated in Proposition XI, second proof]

Even from these premises it still does not quite follow that every possible substance has an essence involving existence, for it has not been ruled out that something should cause the nonexistence of a possible substance. No doubt Spinoza thinks it obvious that nothing could prevent the existence of a possible substance, and so endeavors only to show that every existing substance must be self-caused. We may take this claim as a second tacit premise:

- (9) Nothing can cause the nonexistence of a possible substance.

Let us agree to give Proposition VII, and hence premise (4), the strong reading Spinoza needs to validate his first proof. From premises (6)–(9) this strong reading of Proposition VII follows:

- (10) The essence of every possible substance involves existence.

We need not leave (9) unjustified, however. In his second proof of Proposition XI, Spinoza eliminates the alternative that something could cause the nonexistence of God. He does so in the following way. First, he argues that God's nonexistence could not be caused by a substance with the same set of attributes that God has, apparently on the grounds that if two possible substances share the same set of attributes they are indistinguishable, and hence not really distinct. Such grounds would resemble the grounds he gives for Proposition V. Next, he cites Proposition II, the proposition that "two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another." As mentioned earlier, he

believes that any causal relation is a relation providing a reason or explanation; and he holds (Axiom V) that one thing cannot explain, or allow us to understand, another thing unless the two things have something in common. (We may speculate that this is in order to permit an aspect of one to play some role in the deduction of an aspect of the other.) With these grounds, he explicitly interprets Proposition II as entailing that no substance could either cause or prevent the existence of another possible substance—such as God—which had a different set of attributes. Finally, he maintains (in keeping with the spirit of Definition I) that God could not cause His own nonexistence because a thing could cause its own nonexistence only by being logically impossible. Thus, if we wish to borrow and generalize this argument from the second proof, we may justify premise (9) as follows:

- (9a) The nonexistence of a possible substance cannot be caused by a substance with the same set of attributes.
[Grounds similar to those for Proposition V]
- (9b) The nonexistence of a possible substance cannot be caused by a substance with a different set of attributes.
[From Proposition II and Axiom V]
- (9c) Only an impossible being can cause its own nonexistence.
[Parallel of Definition I]

Premises (9a)–(9c) do not rule out all of the alternatives, however. We are still left with a need for the tacit premise:

- (9d) The nonexistence of a possible substance cannot be caused by a nonsubstance.

It apparently does not even occur to Spinoza that a nonsubstance might prevent the existence of a substance; if pressed, however, he might derive (9d) from Proposition I, the proposition that “substance is by nature prior to its modifications.”

And one more difficulty remains. When we combine (9a)–(9d), we become aware of an ambiguity in (9), the premise that nothing can cause the nonexistence of a possible substance. If we interpret “nothing” as meaning “no state of affairs,” then (9) is adequate for the proof of Proposition VII but does not follow from (9a)–(9d) alone. If we interpret it as meaning “no actual being,” on the other hand, (9) follows from (9a)–(9d) but is not sufficient along with (6)–(8) to obtain (10). That is, it is not sufficient unless we interpret “a cause” in (8) as meaning “an *actual being* which is a cause”; but then (8) will not follow from even a liberal

interpretation of Axiom III. Therefore, unless Spinoza simply commits a fallacy in his argument to show that there could be no cause for God's nonexistence, he must hold at least some principle like the following:

- (9e) No state of affairs which does not involve an actual being can cause the nonexistence of a possible substance.

The ascription of (9e) to Spinoza is made plausible by his practice of referring only to existing beings as causes of the existence or nonexistence of other things (with the exception of impossible beings, which cause their own nonexistence). The same practice makes plausible the ascription to him of a version of (9e) extending to the nonexistence of all nonexisting possible beings. He clearly accepts the extension of (9e) to the existence of all actual beings (see note 5). Indeed, an extended version of (9e) applying to the existence of all actual beings and to the nonexistence of all nonactual beings would follow from (8) if we were to read (8)'s "a cause" as meaning "an actual being which is a cause." It is quite reasonable to speculate that Spinoza at least half intends this reading of (8); however, I prefer to construe (8) as modestly as possible and to isolate (9e) as a separate premise. This moderate reading of (8) requires a strong reading of (9), a reading which follows from (9a)–(9e).

The second proof. The second proof of Proposition XI, we now see, is simply a more explicit formulation of the argument which is needed to justify Proposition VII, but made for the special case of God rather than the general case of substance(s). It begins with an explicit statement of the principle implicitly involved in the proof of Proposition VII, the principle that there must be a reason or cause for the existence or nonexistence of every possible thing. As noted, if Axiom III is given a liberal interpretation, this principle follows from it; otherwise, the principle does not follow from Spinoza's earlier claims. Spinoza then argues that if there is a cause for God's existence, it is either in Himself, in which case He is self-caused and exists necessarily, or in some other being. But, as in the argument for Proposition VII, this latter alternative is ruled out. (It is done here in a trivially different way. Instead of employing the Corollary of Proposition VI, he observes that God is defined as a substance and cites Proposition VII itself.) It follows that God's existence is logically necessary unless there is *no* reason at all for His existence. But by the principle cited at the beginning of the proof, if there is no reason for His existence, then there must be a reason for His nonexistence. As we have already seen, however, Spinoza argues that such a reason could not be found in another substance, and he assumes that it could not be found in a nonsubstance or in any state of affairs not involving the existence of some actual being. Such a reason would therefore have to be found in God's own nature; in other words, God's existence would have to be self-contradictory, or logically impossible. This,

says Spinoza, would be "absurd." Hence, he concludes, God necessarily exists. We may summarize the second proof:

- (11) For everything (existing or not existing) there must be a cause either of its existence (if it exists) or of its nonexistence (if it does not).
[From Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason]
- (12) God is defined as a substance.
[From Definition VI]
- (13) Nothing can cause the existence of a substance other than the substance itself.
[From Proposition VII]
- (14a)–(14e) [Premises (9a)–(9e), with "God" replacing "a possible substance."]
- (15) To be self-caused is to exist necessarily.
[Identification made in Definition I]
- (16) God necessarily exists.

A difficulty with these proofs. Unfortunately for Spinoza, however, it seems that the form of argument given in the first two proofs is capable of proving too much. He defines "God" as "the substance consisting of infinite [that is, all possible, or unlimited] attributes." But there are other possible definitions of substances which might be constructed in a similar way: for example, "the substance whose only attribute is extension," and "the substance whose only attribute is Thought." And if there are more than these two attributes in the universe, then there will be other such substances-of-one-attribute definable, as well as a number of substances-of-two-attributes. If there are more than three attributes, there will also be a number of substances-of-three-attributes definable, and so on. It should be emphasized that the proof of Proposition VII is a perfectly *general* proof of the necessary existence of substance. The first two proofs of Proposition XI seem on the face of them to serve just as well for any of these possible substances as they do for God. For example, it could be argued that, since the substance whose only attribute is Thought is by definition a substance, it cannot be conceived as not existing, since by Proposition VII it pertains to the nature of substance to exist.

Spinoza is thus presented with the following problem. There are many possible definitions of substances (exactly how many is a function of the number of attributes there can be, but given that there are at least two attributes, there are at least three such definitions), each of which is apparently consistent. According to Proposition VII, any consistent definition of a substance must be instantiated. But the joint instantiation of all of the apparently consistent definitions would contradict Proposition V, which declares that no two substances can share the same

attribute. If, for example, every definition of a substance-of-one-attribute were instantiated, substances of more than one attribute could exist only by sharing attributes with substances-of-one-attribute. The challenge for Spinoza is to show that some of the apparently consistent definitions are really inconsistent, and thus that they do not fall under the scope of Proposition VII.

Wolfson believes that Spinoza has already concluded prior to Proposition VII that there is only one substance, but I can find little support for Wolfson's view. In Proposition VIII Spinoza is still speaking of "every substance," and he begins by mentioning "substance which has only one attribute," arguing hypothetically that—just as I said—any such substance would, by Proposition VII, exist necessarily. The conclusion of his hypothetical argument is only that any substance must be infinite within the realm of its own attributes. The possibility of the existence of more than one substance is not ruled out until Proposition XIV—and then on the grounds that the existence of any other substances would be incompatible (by Proposition V) with the existence of God, whose existence was proven in Proposition XI. But of course this argument for Proposition XIV does not solve Spinoza's problem. Why not instead have given a proof parallel to the first or second proof of Proposition XI—as he tells us we could—to establish the existence of, say, each substance-of-one-attribute? Then at Proposition XIV we could have ruled out the existence of God, the substance of all attributes, by showing that His existence would (by Proposition V) be incompatible with the existence of all the other substances already "proven" to exist. This difficulty cannot be ignored. For it may be observed that the validity of the first proof and the justification of premises (14a)–(14e) of the second proof depend on Spinoza's assumption that the definition of "God" is consistent, or that God is a possible substance. And the possibility of an a priori proof of God's nonexistence, like the one just outlined, calls that assumption into question.

One way to show that—contrary to first appearances—no substance other than God is even possible, would be to show that the existence of any other substance entails a contradiction. Since Spinoza regards it as a proven necessity that no two substances can share an attribute, he can argue that the existence of any substance other than God entails God's nonexistence. So if he could demonstrate at the same time that the existence of any substance entails the existence of God, he could then credibly claim to have derived a contradiction from the assumption that a substance other than God exists. In effect, the existence of any such substance would entail the existence of another being, God, incompatible with its own existence. Finally, if it could be safely assumed that the existence of God does not entail the existence of any other substance, then it could be argued that the definition of God had been shown to be the only consistent definition of a substance. I believe that Spinoza recognizes the problem I have described, and that the third and fourth proofs embody the strategy I have suggested. Let us now consider those proofs.