Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Spinoza and the *Ethics*

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Abbreviations

Abbreviated references to the *Ethics* follow the conventions introduced by Curley in the introduction to *A Spinoza Reader* (Curley 1994: xxxv). Thus:

- **E**= *Ethics*
- **A**= Axiom
- **P**= Proposition
- **D** (following a Roman numeral)= Definition
- **D** (following P+an arabic numeral)= the Demonstration of the proposition
- **C**= Corollary
- **S**= Scholium
- **Exp**= Explanation
- **L**= Lemma
- **Post**= Postulate
- **Pref**= Preface
- **App**= Appendix
- **DefAff**= the definition of the affects at the end of Part III
Chapter 1
Spinoza in his time and ours
The outsider

Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down, and cursed be he when he rises up; cursed be he when he goes out, and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not pardon him; the anger and wrath of the Lord will rage against this man, and bring upon him all the curses which are written in the Book of the Law, and the Lord will destroy his name from under the Heavens…

(Wolf 1927:146)

Thus did the wardens of the Amsterdam synagogue excommunicate the 24-year-old Baruch Spinoza, on 27 July 1656. The record of excommunication mentions ‘horrible heresies which he practised and taught’ and ‘monstrous actions which he performed’. The content of the ‘heresies’ can be reconstructed from contemporary reports of his beliefs and from his writings. Spinoza held unorthodox views on the nature of God and of the human soul, on immortality and on the status of prophecy. Spinoza’s early biographers make it clear that his views were widely despised. The nature of the ‘monstrous deeds’ mentioned in the record of excommunication is more difficult to determine.

There are two old biographies of Spinoza. One was written by a Lutheran clergyman, Johan Cohler—Latinized as ‘Colerus’—and first published in 1705. The other, by Jean Maximilian Lucas—a freethinking French refugee living in Holland—is thought to have been written soon after Spinoza’s death in 1677, though not published until 1719. Colerus describes Spinoza’s physical appearance: ‘He was of a middle size, he had good features in his Face, the Skin somewhat black, black curl’d Hair, long Eye-brows, and of the same Colour, so that one might easily know by his Looks that he was descended from Portuguese Jews’ (Pollock 1899:394). Spinoza’s doctrines are presented by Colerus as ‘impious’, ‘absurd’ and ‘pernicious’; but he grudgingly acknowledges the integrity and amiability of the character from which they issued.

The older biography makes the allegation of ‘monstrous actions’ even less plausible. Lucas, who knew Spinoza personally, presents him as a lover of solitude, enjoying nonetheless the company of the ‘real men of learning’ who sought him out in The Hague, where he eventually settled. Lucas offers a picture of a man given over to a passionate love of learning, but delighting too in the joys of sociability—a lover of company who was not dependent on the admiration of others. His Spinoza is a man with a ‘well-seasoned’ wit, whose misfortune resulted not from monstrous deeds but from his being ‘too good and too enlightened’. Lucas stresses Spinoza’s freedom from concern with fame or appearances. When he was dying
Spinoza requested that his name should not be put on the *Ethics*, saying that such affectations were unworthy of a philosopher. Lucas reports, too, that Spinoza consciously avoided the cultivation of untidiness which is often the mark of the philosopher, quoting him as suggesting that ‘such affectation of negligence is the mark of an inferior mind’ (Wolf 1927:64). Colerus in contrast describes Spinoza as careless in dress, to the point of slovenliness, quoting him as saying that ‘it is unreasonable to wrap up things of little or no value in a precious Cover’ (Pollock 1899:394). Whatever the facts of his appearance, we can take it that Spinoza was not motivated by a desire to impress others.

His excommunication was clearly a significant event in the life of the young Spinoza; but Lucas’s version of the story presents him as anything but a passive victim. On hearing of the ban, Spinoza responded: ‘All the better; they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal’ (Wolf 1927:51). It is true that the young heretic, who now called himself ‘Benedict de Spinoza’, was condemned to exile. But, if Lucas is to be believed, the sentence, ‘very far from injuring Mr de Spinosa, favoured the longing which he felt to leave Amsterdam’. What was crucial for Spinoza was ‘the love of solitude in which, he had no doubt, he would find Truth’ (Wolf 1927:56). The same love, reinforced perhaps by a shrewd caution, later led Spinoza to refuse the offer of a professorship at Heidelberg, saying that the instruction of the young would be an obstacle to his own studies and indicating his discomfort about the stipulated condition that he would not abuse his freedom of speech to ‘disturb the established religion’. In the lack of any income from his philosophical pursuits, Spinoza met his frugal needs—without sacrificing his independence and solitude—by making lenses for optical instruments. His vigorous intellectual life was not matched by physical robustness; and his work with glass contributed to the consumption which caused his early death. The cause of death prompted Hegel, in his account of Spinoza’s life in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, to engage in fanciful speculation on the connections between Spinoza’s life and his work:

Spinoza died on the 21st February, 1677, in the forty-fourth year of his age. The cause of his death was consumption, from which he had long been a sufferer. This was in harmony with his system of philosophy, according to which all particularity and individuality pass away in the one substance.

(Hegel 1840:254)

Spinoza’s fatal choice of lens grinding as a livelihood was for Hegel no more incidental than his resulting death; it expressed—whether

or not he was aware of it—his philosophical commitment to the oneness of things. ‘It was no arbitrary choice that led him to occupy himself with light, for it represents in the material sphere the absolute identity which forms the foundation of the oriental view of things’ (Hegel 1840:253).
We may well be sceptical about Hegel’s bold projections from the content of Spinoza’s philosophy to the details of his life. But an understanding of some aspects of the life does allow a richer appreciation of what is distinctive about the philosophy. This is especially true of the complex cultural and religious tensions within which Spinoza came to maturity.

Spinoza was born in Amsterdam, on 24 November 1632, into a community of ‘Marranos’, who had left Portugal in the 1590s for the comparatively tolerant environment of the Netherlands. The Marranos were Portuguese and Spanish Jews, forcibly converted to at least an outward observance of Christianity, who had maintained Jewish practices in private until their position became increasingly precarious with the spread of the Inquisition.

Physical, cultural and political dualities provided a context for the dominant themes of Spinoza’s philosophy: the unity of a reality which nonetheless undergoes a myriad transformations; the dynamic character of bodies, minds and ideas; the transformation of emotions through understanding them. Seventeenth-century Netherlands culture was itself thickly layered with dualities—with tensions and movements between opposites—as new identities were forged in differentiation from the cultural patterns associated with Spanish rule. But in the midst of the dualities that found expression in seventeenth-century Dutch culture, the consciousness of Marrano Jews was subjected to a further set of tensions and ironies.

Yirmiyahu Yovel, in his study of Spinoza, *The Marrano of Reason*, gives a fascinating account of the ways in which Spinoza’s Marronite background shows up in his philosophy. Yovel sees it reflected in the style of the *Ethics* as well as in its content: in Spinoza’s mastery of dual language and equivocation—the capacity to speak to different audiences in different ways, masking his true intentions to some while disclosing them to others. Spinoza’s break with both Judaism and Christianity is, for Yovel, a ‘harbinger of the modern era’, with its scepticism and its breakdown of traditional structures (Yovel 1989:13). These compulsory converts to Christianity, he points out, were in an ambivalent position in relation to both religions. As refugees from the Inquisition they were ‘exiles within an exile’ with no firm social or spiritual identity, living in a state of existential alienation (Yovel 1989:22-4). Their former lives in Spain or Portugal involved a duality between their inner being as Jews and the outward forms of their lives. But in their new cultural context the Jewishness of the Marranos was often treated with suspicion by the local rabbis.

The phenomenological experience of Marronism was thus predominantly an experience of dualities and tensions—of a split between inner being and outward behaviour. This tension between truth and appearance may initially have been a survival strategy under conditions of persecution. But it was internalised, Yovel argues, as a more complex tension between a reclaimed Judaism and a residual Christianity in the symbols, attitudes and world images the Marranos carried with them (Yovel 1989:28). Spinoza repeated the dualistic life patterns of the Marranos twice over. He played out the rift between the inner and the outer both as a young dissenter within the Jewish community and as a free-thinker and reputed atheist in Calvinist-dominated Holland. Spinoza, on this construction, becomes a ‘Marrano of Reason’ anticipating, before it is a social reality, the modern ideal of a ‘genuine individual’, marked only by rational powers—a ‘universalist’ capacity, with no root or affiliation in a particular religious community (Yovel 1989:34).
Spinoza was thus an outsider in his immediate social context, not only in relation to the prevalent Calvinist culture—which was itself in turn reacting against Spanish Catholicism—but also in relation to the Jewishness of his immediate Marrano context; and that context was itself in turn in tension with local orthodoxy. The capacity for distance, detachment and irony—and for the intellectual play and transformation of ideas which those capacities make possible—are evident in the content and in the style of the *Ethics*. Spinoza draws on a wealth of philosophical sources. But constantly in the text we see concepts appropriated from earlier thought turn into something dramatically different.

This capacity to transform philosophical ideas is particularly marked in the *Ethics*. Spinoza—at times with manifest irony—pushes concepts to the point where they turn into something quite unlike their sources. To read the *Ethics* is to see a succession of old, well-worn philosophical ideas made over in new and often startling forms. Themes from ancient thought—from the Stoics, Epicureans and Neoplatonists as well as from Plato and Aristotle—reverberate in the text. There are strong echoes too of medieval voices—of Maimonides, the twelfth-century philosopher and commentator on biblical and Talmudic texts, and of St Thomas Aquinas’s thirteenth-century appropriations of Aristotelian thought—as well as of his contemporaries, Descartes and Hobbes. A brief look at some of the themes which Spinoza takes over from other philosophers, and at their transformations, will help us see the dynamic character of his thought.

Spinoza’s treatment of knowledge, and of the relations between minds and bodies, centres on a concept familiar from seventeenth-century philosophy—the concept of ‘idea’. But his use of the term draws ingeniously on both its seventeenth-century connotations of mental content and older connotations drawn from ancient Greek philosophy. Spinoza’s version of ‘ideas’ has connections with Aristotle’s concept of form—the intelligible principle of a thing. But there are crucial differences as well as continuities between Aristotelian ‘forms’ and Spinoza’s ‘ideas’. The difference comes out in Spinoza’s famous treatment of the mind as ‘idea’ of the body. For Aristotle the soul as ‘form’ is the intelligible principle, in knowing which we know the capacities of the living human being—not only intellect but also sensation, locomotion and growth. The soul is the ‘form’ of the body. It is what we know in knowing the body. But it is not a mental object, set over against the body. It makes the body the living thing it is. The closeness this gives the mind-body relation is echoed in Spinoza’s insistence of the unity of mind and body. But this unity now has a different rationale.

Spinozistic minds, like other ‘ideas’, are expressions of reality under the ‘attribute’ of thought. And the same reality is expressed under another attribute—matter or extension—as finite bodies. Each attribute is a way in which the same reality becomes intelligible. Mind and body draw even closer here than in the Aristotelian framework; they are the same reality, though expressed in different ways. Yet into this new version of mind-matter unity, Spinoza has incorporated also the seventeenth-century preoccupation with ideas as mental contents. Spinoza’s ‘ideas’ differ from Aristotelian ‘forms’ in being essentially mental items, rather than ways in which matter is constituted or determined. But the mind’s status in relation to these mental contents is not what we might
expect from familiarity with other seventeenth-century versions of ‘ideas’. The individual mind—rather than being the repository of private mental contents, set over against an outer world—becomes itself an idea with the human body as its object. The mind’s awareness is not directed at some mental item from which it infers the existence of body as something external. The immediacy of this new relation between mind and matter contrasts especially with the mediated relation characteristic of earlier Cartesian treatments of the mind-body relation. It harks back to the Aristotelian doctrine of the mind as the form of the body, the intelligible principle through which body is understood. Spinoza has brought the old closeness of the relation between form and living matter into the framework of seventeenth-century epistemology, yielding a new way of looking at minds and bodies.

Such startling shifts between different conceptual frameworks are, as we shall see, a recurring feature of the Ethics. To take another example, Spinoza’s extraordinary claim that the human mind is an idea in the mind of God—the claim which he himself acknowledges will make many of his readers pause in initial incomprehension—takes us back to Aristotelian ideas and their reconstructions in medieval thought—to Maimonides and St Thomas Aquinas. Spinoza evokes the ways in which some of the Hebrews perceived ‘as if through a cloud’ the unity of God, his intellect and the things he understands. The identity echoes Maimonides’s talk, in the Guide for the Perplexed, of the philosophical principle that God is ‘the intellectus, the intelligens and the intelligibile’ and that in him these three things are one and the same (Maimonides 1956: Ch. LXVIII, 101-2). Maimonides’s unities echo in turn Aristotle’s account in the Metaphysics (Book XII, Ch. 9) of the ‘active intellect’ of God. In thinking the object of its thought, says Aristotle, this intellect thinks itself: its thought and the object of its thought are the same. Aquinas affirms similar identities in the Summa Theologiae (I, Ia, 68). But

Spinoza, as we shall see, transforms this unity of the divine intellect and its objects into the idea that reality itself is one and the same, whether it be grasped under the attribute of extension or that of thought. An esoteric doctrine of the nature of divine knowledge here becomes an innovative metaphysical theory of the relation between mind and matter in general.

Spinoza’s central concept of conatus—the ‘striving’ through which a thing endeavours to stay in being—likewise has a distinguished history. Harry Wolfson (1934), in his exhaustive study of Spinoza’s sources, traces it back to the ideas of ancient Stoicism—the philosophy which takes its name from the stoa poikile or Painted Porch in Athens, where its founder Zeno taught in the fourth-century BC. Stoic thought continued through a long tradition of distinctive theories of logic, physics and ethics, resonating in medieval philosophy and through the subsequent philosophical tradition. The early chronicler of ancient philosophers, Diogenes Laertius, attributed to the Stoics the idea that an animal has self-preservation as ‘the object of its first impulse’ (Long and Sedley 1987: I, sec. 57, 346). A similar idea surfaces in the writings of Augustine, in the fourth-century AD, and of Aquinas, in the thirteenth, as the idea of a basic impulse towards staying in existence—a natural force which impels living things away from self-destruction (Wolfson 1934: II, 195-9). Spinoza’s version of conatus, unlike its ancient counterparts, is not confined to animate things. Here physics and biology come together; there are echoes of ancient principles of motion as well as of Greek and Latin concepts of appetite. Spinoza identifies conatus with the very being of finite things, claiming—at first sight paradoxically—that a thing’s endeavour to persist in being is identical
with its very essence. Another striking feature of Spinoza’s version of the concept is that, in the case of those finite individuals which are human, conatus is intimately connected with reason—the faculty commonly set over against natural drives towards self-preservation. Here again there are echoes of Stoic conceptions of living in accordance with reason as ‘natural’ for rational beings—of reason supervening as ‘the craftsman of impulse’ (Long and Sedley 1987: I, sec. 57, 346). But the metaphor of the craftsman is at odds with the way Spinoza grounds his version of a ‘natural’ reason in the understanding of necessary bodily forces.

Spinoza’s concept of conatus—like the similar concept of his contemporary Thomas Hobbes—is grounded in the physics of motion. In his commentary on Descartes’s Principles, Spinoza defines the ‘striving for motion’ as not having to do with any thought, but rather with a part of matter being ‘so placed and stirred to motion, that it really would go somewhere if it were not prevented by any cause’ (Curley 1985:297). But Spinoza pushes much further than Hobbes the connections between conatus and the very essences of finite things; and he uses it, as we shall see, to transform the Hobbesian idea that all things necessarily seek their own self-preservation. Connections are already drawn, in the appendix to the commentary, between the concept of conatus, and Spinoza’s transformation of the idea of the Good; and the concept is already linked, too, with his treatment of individuality. Even here Spinoza stresses that ‘the thing itself, and the striving that is in it to preserve its being, are not in any way really distinct. The force that motion has of persevering in its state is, he says, not really distinct from the motion itself; it is only through confusion that we think of a separate metaphysical good at which the thing aims. The reason why some distinguish the thing’s striving from the thing itself is that they find in themselves a longing to preserve themselves and misleadingly imagine such a longing in each thing (Curley 1985:314).

In the Ethics Spinoza develops the notion of conatus into a radically new ethical concept. A thing’s endeavour to persist in being becomes its very essence. And in the case of those individuals that are human this endeavour has intimate connections with reason. Appetite and reason come together in the conatus of the mind as idea of the body. Self-preservation becomes for Spinoza the foundation and end of virtue. The continuation of existence, rather than being a formal prerequisite for virtue, becomes what we desire in desiring virtue—the good itself. The dichotomy between self-seeking and altruism here falls away. Self-seeking—traditionally opposed to rational virtue—now becomes its foundation.

Spinoza’s treatment of the relations between reason and the passions also re-works ethical and metaphysical ideas drawn from ancient Stoicism. The Stoic theme of the passions as irrational—as ‘excessive impulses’ recurs in Spinoza’s thought, along with the idea that the virtuous are governed not by passion but by alternative forms of rational emotion. For the Stoics the virtuous mind is devoid of passion, though it acts from a rational, non-passionate form of desire and experiences a rational joy. For Spinoza too we are virtuous to the extent that we are free of passion; and he echoes the Stoics also in his claim that this desired state of freedom from the passions is acquired by pursuing through reason a state of harmony with nature. But Spinoza again transforms these Stoic themes: it is through understanding the passions themselves that the wise mind attains freedom. Rather than looking to reason as an alternative source of motivation to the harmful passions—turning
away, as it were, from passion—the virtuous mind attains freedom by bringing its understanding to bear on its own passions, transforming them into active, rational emotions. It is not by shunning the passions, but by accepting their necessity and attempting to understand their operations, that we become virtuous and free.

It is in the relations between Spinoza’s philosophy and that of his immediate intellectual predecessor, René Descartes (1596-1650), that we see most clearly his distinctive capacity to transform familiar ideas into something radically different. Colerus tells us that Spinoza read the works of Descartes ‘greedily’ and often declared that he had all his philosophical knowledge from him (Pollock 1899:389). The French historian of philosophy, Etienne Gilson, has described Spinoza as ‘an incomparable commentator’ on Descartes. His early commentary on Descartes’s Principles stays close to the Cartesian philosophy; and the Cartesian perspective remains strong in the appended Metaphysical Thoughts. But even in these early works there are intimations of what is to come.

In the Ethics Spinoza developed, from Cartesian starting points, doctrines that were for the Cartesians outrageous. If Spinoza had lived before Descartes, the French philosopher Henri Bergson observed, he would doubtless have written something other than what he wrote. But ‘given Spinoza living and writing, we were certain to have Spinozism in any case’ (Bergson 1968:134). Concepts of substance, attribute, and mode—adapted by Descartes out of earlier medieval philosophy—undergo extraordinary transformation in Spinoza’s thought. Descartes presented God as substance in a unique sense—

independent of all other being in a way that applies to him alone. In the Ethics Spinoza transformed that idea of God into the idea of a unique substance, of which all other things are modifications. Thought and matter—treated by Descartes as two distinct kinds of substance—become different attributes of God as substance. The transformation goes beyond the positive development of Cartesian ideas. Spinoza, employing the rigorous deductive method which Descartes himself had endorsed, pushes the Cartesian principles he had so ably interpreted in his earlier work to dramatically opposed conclusions. The strategy takes its most devastating form, as we shall see in chapter 2, in Spinoza’s transformation of the Cartesian individual thinking substance into his own version of the mind as an idea in the mind of God.

How many ‘Spinozas’?

Spinoza transformed the ideas of his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries—often into their opposites. The shifts and transformations in the reception and appropriation of his own work are no less dramatic. Gilles Deleuze has described him as belonging to a ‘counter-history’ of philosophy: while appearing to be a part of the history of philosophy, he also escapes it (Deleuze et al. 1977:14-15). His works have evoked extreme emotional reactions. Indeed his name has taken on, throughout subsequent philosophy, the status of a symbol with dramatically shifting content. The hostile reactions to his published writings began during his lifetime. But it was through the portrayal of his thought in Pierre Bayle’s famous Historical and Critical Dictionary that Spinoza became a symbol of pernicious atheism.

Bayle (1647-1706)—‘the philosopher of Rotterdam’, as he came to be called—was a French Protestant, originally a professor at the Sedan academy, who was given a post by the worthies
of Rotterdam. His *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, first published in 1697, was repeatedly abridged and widely read throughout the eighteenth century. As well as being an encyclopaedia of historical events and biblical characters, the dictionary was a source of analyses—not always reliable—of philosophical systems. Transmitted through

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the dictionary, Spinoza’s equation of God and nature, and his treatment of individual things as modifications of one being, take on monstrous overtones. Peter Gay, in his study of the Enlightenment, describes the dictionary article on Spinoza as having ‘misled a whole century’ (Gay 1973:293). In it Bayle described his system as resting on the most monstrous hypothesis that could be imagined—the most absurd and the most diametrically opposed to the most evident notions of the mind (Bayle 1697: N, 60).

Bayle’s scathing criticism centres on the doctrine of the uniqueness of substance. For Spinoza God is the only being which can stand alone, independent of any external cause or subject in which he must inhere. Everything else that exists is then seen as a modification or ‘mode’ of this one being. Bayle construes the implications of the doctrine as surpassing ‘the fantastic ravings of the maddest heads that were ever locked up’. In place of divine immutability, Bayle complains, Spinoza introduces a constantly changing God—the ultimate subject of all crimes and infirmities. Such a God, Bayle reasons, must be full of contradictions. Since there is no other agent or subject of properties than this one indivisible substance, he must hate and love, deny and affirm contradictory things. From the standpoint of morality, this God is an abomination, producing in himself all the follies and iniquities of humankind. All those who say that Germans have killed ten thousand Turks must speak falsely unless they mean that God, modified as Germans, has killed the Turks. All the phrases by which one expresses what men do against one another will have no true sense other than that God hates himself, asks favours of himself and refuses them, persecutes himself, kills himself, eats himself, calumniates himself, throws himself on the scaffold, and so on. Having reduced God to the most perfect simplicity—to the unity and indivisibility of substance—Spinoza must attribute to him the most infamous extravagances that can be conceived, infinitely more ridiculous than those of the poets concerning the pagan gods.

Although Bayle accuses Spinoza of atheism, his main attack on the doctrine of the unity of substance focuses—somewhat inconsistently—on what he sees as its implications for the divine nature. He is outraged by the idea that human atrocities become the self-mutilations of an all-encompassing God. There have been

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philosophers impious enough, he says, to deny that there is a God; but they have not pushed their extravagance so far as to say that if he existed, his nature would not involve perfect happiness (Bayle 1983: N, sec. IV, 68-70). What makes Spinoza’s doctrines most disturbing for Bayle is that he so emphatically insists that his God does indeed exist, and must do so of necessity.

The tensions in interpretation of Spinoza’s ‘atheism’ persist in later reception of his writings. Spinozism becomes a symbol of a terrible impiety—a threat to orthodox theology and morals. Bayle’s image of Spinoza as a perverse atheist dominated the early reception of the *Ethics*. In the lack of ready access to Spinoza’s writings, the *Dictionary* was the only source of
knowledge of his philosophy. The wide diffusion of Bayle’s version of Spinoza allowed David Hume (1711-76), writing in the *Treatise of Human Nature* in 1739, to use Spinoza ironically for his own purposes as symbol of loathsome atheism. Hume’s aim was to startle his readers into a recognition of the strangeness of the familiar and respectable doctrine of the mind as an individual substance. Hume suggests that the doctrine of immateriality, simplicity and individuality of the mind as a thinking substance is ‘a true atheism’, comparable to the doctrines for which Spinoza is ‘universally infamous’. He claims to show easily, without entering far into the ‘gloomy and obscure regions’ of Spinoza’s philosophy, that its central ‘hideous hypothesis’ is almost the same as that of the immateriality of the soul, which has become in contrast so popular.

Hume considers first the ‘universe of objects or body’. ‘Here Spinoza appears and tells me, that these are only modifications, and that the subject, in which they inhere is simple, uncompounded, and indivisible.’ Hume presents himself as then considering the ‘universe of thought’—the realm of mental representation of the supposedly external world. Here he observes, he says, another sun, moon and stars—everything he can discover or conceive in the first system. Theologians, he continues, now present themselves and tell him that these also are modifications of one, simple, uncompounded and indivisible substance. ‘Immediately upon which I am deafen’d with the noise of a hundred voices, that treat the first hypothesis with detestation and scorn, and the second with applause and veneration.’ Both hypotheses, Hume comments, have the same fault of being unintelligible, and it is impossible to discover any absurdity in one which is not common to both of them (Hume 1739: Book I, Part IV, sec. V, 240-3).

In German thought of the late eighteenth century, the symbolic force of Spinoza shifted, in emotionally charged and confusing debates about whether the highly esteemed literary figure Gotthold Lessing (1729-81) endorsed the doctrine of pantheism, with its connotations of a rejection of all distinction between God and world. The interpretation of Spinoza’s concept of God-or-substance became enmeshed with controversies centred on the authority of reason and its impact on received ideas of the relations between God and world. Lessing was believed to have said towards the end of his life that he was a Spinozist. The ensuing controversy centred on the supposed tensions between Christianity and Enlightenment preoccupations with reason. Here the interpretive issue of whether Spinoza’s metaphysics ends in atheism becomes entangled with the more general question whether all metaphysics—indeed reason itself—does so. Spinoza operates as symbol of both reason and atheism in a debate that sets up a choice between a ‘rational’ and an ‘irrational’ faith. Spinoza is seen as an uncompromising rationalist whose philosophy leaves no room for morality, religion or common sense. But the symbolic force of Spinoza in this intellectual climate was by no means entirely negative. There was another thread in these debates which yielded a much more positive assessment of the implications of Spinozism. Spinoza was taken to be committed to pantheism—the identification of God and world. But although that doctrine could be taken as a downgrading of the divine, it could also be seen as an elevation of nature.

The poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), in his study *Philosophy in Germany*, described Spinoza as a ‘providential man’, long regarded with derision and hatred, but now raised to ‘the throne of intellectual supremacy’ (Heine 1835:69). Heine associates Spinoza neither with the forbidding restraints of rationalism nor with the nihilism of atheism.
In reading Spinoza’s works we become conscious of a feeling such as pervades us at the sight of great nature in her most lifelike state of repose; we behold a forest of heaven-reaching thoughts whose blossoming topmost boughs are tossing like waves of the sea, whilst their immovable stems are rooted in the eternal earth. There is a peculiar, indescribable fragrance about the writings of Spinoza. We seem to breathe in them the air of the future.

(Heine 1835:69)

Far from seeing Spinoza as a nihilistic, anti-religious atheist, Heine admires in him an earnestness—a self-conscious bearing, a ‘solemn grandeur of thought’—inherited from the spirit of the Hebrew prophets (Heine 1835:70). The common view of Spinoza as an atheist springs, Heine suggests, from ‘sheer unreason and malice’ (Heine 1835:72). No one has ever spoken more sublimely of Deity than Spinoza. Instead of saying that he denied God, one might say that he denied man, presenting the human mind as but a ‘luminous ray of infinite thought’, the human body as but ‘an atom of infinite extension’ (Heine 1835:72). The political significance of Spinozism is for Heine thus far removed from the nihilism his critics have deplored. The idea that the divinity of man reveals itself in his corporeal form underpins a commitment to the material happiness of nations which comes not from a contempt for the spirit but from an exaltation of matter (Heine 1835:78).

The fascination of Spinozism in eighteenth-century German thought reverberated through the literature of the Romantics. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) talks in his autobiography of the enormous impact on him of the *Ethics*, which was destined, he says, to affect deeply his whole mode of thinking.

Of what I read of the work, and of what I read into it, I can give no account. But I certainly found in it a sedative for my passions, and that a free, wide view over the sensible and moral world seemed to open before me.

(Goethe 1971:261)

Goethe singles out as the core of Spinoza’s profound influence on him the ‘utter disinterestedness which shone forth in his every sentence’. He senses in Spinoza an affinity of spirit, despite the manifest difference in their forms of writing.

(Goethe 1971:261-2)

Spinoza was a strong intellectual presence also for the English Romantics. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), in his *Biographia Literaria*, talks of the influence of Spinozistic
themes on his intellectual development. His interest in Spinoza indeed figured in an odd episode in which Coleridge, suspected of being a subversive supporter of the French Revolution, became the object of surveillance by an unlikely figure with a large nose. The eavesdropper mistakes for a reference to himself a remark of Coleridge’s about one ‘Spy Nozy’, before it becomes apparent that he is talking of ‘a man who had made a book and lived long ago’ (Coleridge 1817:106). For Coleridge, the associations of Spinozism in its pure form are not so much with mystical vision as with a rigorous rationalism. He is particularly struck by Spinoza’s repudiation of a personal God: ‘For a very long time indeed I could not reconcile personality with infinity; and my head was with Spinoza, though my whole heart remained with Paul and John’ (Coleridge 1817:112). Although he compares Spinoza with the ancient philosophers who taught not only that God was All, but that this All constituted God, Coleridge cautions—in a criticism of some of the defects in Wordsworth’s poetry—that this in no way confounds ‘the part as a part, with the Whole, as the whole…. Nay, in no system is the distinction between the individual and God, between the modification, and the one only substance, more sharply drawn than in that of Spinoza’ (Coleridge 1817:261).

Hegel (1770-1832) too defended Spinoza against the charge of atheism. In his Lectures on the History of Philosophy he described Spinoza’s idea of substance as ‘the foundation of all true views’. Thought must begin, he suggests, by ‘placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism’. To be a follower of Spinoza is ‘the essential commencement of all Philosophy’. The activity of philosophy must begin by the soul’s ‘bathing in this ether of the one Substance’, which is ‘the liberation of the mind and its absolute foundation’. The ‘grandeur’ of Spinoza’s manner of thought lies in his being able to ‘renounce all that is determinate and particular, and restrict himself to the one, giving heed to this alone’ (Hegel 1840: vol. 3, 257-8).

Hegel has his own criticisms—which we will examine in chapter 2—of Spinoza’s doctrine of substance. But he regards the charge that it amounts to an atheistic denial of all distinction between God and world as unfounded: although those who speak against Spinoza claim to do so ‘on God’s account’, what those opponents are really concerned about is not God but their own finitude. If Spinoza is called an atheist solely because he does not distinguish God from world, it is, Hegel argues, a misuse of the term. Reality and permanence are to be ascribed to God alone.

The world has no true reality, and all this that we know as the world has been cast into the abyss of the one identity. There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth whatever; according to Spinoza what is, is God and God alone. Therefore the allegations of those who accuse Spinoza of atheism are the direct opposite of the truth; with him there is too much God.

(Hegel 1840: vol. 3, 281-2)

On Hegel’s reading of Spinoza, nature and the individual disappear in the same identity. Spinoza’s critics, Hegel observes, cannot forgive him for thus annihilating them. His ‘pantheism’, on Hegel’s interpretation, amounts to atheism only in as much as his God is not conceived only as spirit, but also as matter.
Nietzsche (1844-1900)—less absorbed in metaphysical doctrines of the unity of substance, the nature of infinity or the relations between the attributes of God—finds in Spinoza rich affinities with his own thought on a range of themes. In a postcard of 1881, to Franz Overbeck, he speaks approvingly of Spinoza’s treatment of knowledge as ‘the most powerful affect’, and identifies five other main points in which he recognises himself in the work of this ‘most unusual and loneliest thinker’: Spinoza denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral order, the unegoistic and evil (Kaufmann 1965:92).

The vexed issue of Spinoza’s ‘atheism’ has continued to recede in more recent commentary; but the ambiguities have persisted. The *Ethics* has shown an extraordinary capacity to admit diametrically opposed readings. Recent English-language commentaries have articulated its central metaphysical and epistemological themes in ways that bring Spinoza into contact with the orientations and terminology of modern analytical philosophy. Edwin Curley has presented Spinoza’s treatment of the relations between thought and extension as attributes of God in terms of the identity of true propositions and facts (Curley 1969:119-43). And Jonathan Bennett’s *Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* draws many parallels with contemporary debates in philosophy of mind and metaphysics. The Italian commentator, Antonio Negri, in contrast, looks to Spinoza’s philosophy for enrichment of Marxist conceptions of power. Others have seen Spinoza’s treatment of the mind as part of nature as a source of insights into contemporary issues of environmental ethics. And Gilles Deleuze presents it as a basis for developing a broader concept of ethology—a study of relations of individual and collective capacities for affecting and being affected.

It is a tribute to the richness of the *Ethics* that it should resonate in such diverse ways in the imagination of its readers. But the work’s capacity to evoke such a plethora of readings should also alert us to the need for caution. The *Ethics*, more than most philosophical writings, demands of its readers a reflective awareness of the reading process. We need to reflect as we read it on the assumptions we bring to the work. However, the first challenge to the new reader of Spinoza is, not so much to avoid misinterpretations, as to get a grip at all on what is going on in the initially overwhelming array of geometrical definitions, axioms, propositions and corollaries.

**Reading Spinoza**

What was Spinoza’s rationale in presenting a philosophical work as if it were a work of geometry? Leibniz, in his notes on the *Ethics*, complained that Spinoza introduces irrelevant propositions into his argumentation ‘as an empty and pretentious device to twist the whole into the form of a demonstration’ (Leibniz 1678:202). Many have commented on the strange disparity between the apparently sterile geometrical method and the imaginative and emotional richness of the work. Heine described the ‘harsh exterior’ of the mathematical method as the hard shell of the almond which renders the kernel all the more agreeable (Heine 1835:69). Contemporary readers may well think the
form of the *Ethics* a more difficult nut to crack than the relatively accommodating almond evoked by Heine. In a metaphor which reverses Heine’s imagery of crushing, Henri Bergson (1859–1941), in *The Creative Mind*, described the geometrical structure of the *Ethics* as ‘that complication of machinery, that power to crush which causes the beginner, in the presence of the *Ethics*, to be struck with admiration and terror as though he were before a battleship of the Dreadnaught class’ (Bergson 1968:133).

Why did Spinoza choose to present his philosophical insights in such an intimidating form? And what bearing does it have on the content of the work? The use of geometrical method in philosophical writing was not itself new. But Spinoza, in presenting the whole of the *Ethics* in geometrical form, goes further than any of his predecessors. Even Descartes, who extolled the geometrical method, made only sparing use of it in his own writing. In replying to one of his critics, he used the geometrical form to render more perspicuous some of the argumentation of his *Meditations*. The effect is similar to the way a contemporary philosopher might highlight the structure of an argument by rendering it in the forms of symbolic logic. In the *Ethics*, in contrast, the geometrical form pervades the work as a whole.

From the perspective of modern readers the form may be an impediment to ready access to the work; but some commentators have suggested that for Spinoza it was primarily a pedagogical device, bringing to the subject matter of the *Ethics* the clearness and distinctness of mathematical proof. Edwin Curley, in the editorial preface to his translation of the *Ethics*, presents Spinoza’s choice of the axiomatic method as representing ‘nothing more, and nothing less, than an awesome commitment to intellectual honesty and clarity’. Spinoza, he suggests, wishes to use no important term without explaining the sense in which it is to be understood, to make no crucial assumption without identifying it as a proposition taken to require no arguments, to draw no conclusion without being very explicit about why that conclusion is thought to follow from his assumptions.

(Curley 1985:402).

Other commentators find a deeper, more metaphysical rationale in the method, seeing it as reflecting Spinoza’s rationalist commitment to the order of the universe. Spinoza claims in Part Two of the *Ethics* that the ‘order of thought’ is one and the same as the ‘order of being’. It is perhaps not surprising then that he should present the work in a way which confronts the reader with the ideal of ordered structure implicit in the form of Euclid’s *Elements*. The world for Spinoza is a unity in which there is no discontinuity of parts. Thought and matter are not related as distinct parts of reality. Nor is there any realm of human action or purpose separated out as a ‘kingdom within a kingdom’ in which immunity might be granted from the necessities governing the rest of nature. The geometrical method seems appropriate to the expression of a philosophy thus committed to the idea of the world as a unified whole governed by universal laws. Just as the whole of nature flows from God, the philosophical account of it flows from demonstrations of the nature and existence of God.

Wolfson speculates that Spinoza might have used the geometrical method in reaction against literary forms reintroduced into philosophical writing with the Renaissance—against the use of dialogues after the manner of Plato, poetry after the manner of Lucretius and rhetorical
prose after the manner of Cicero. It might also, he suggests, have served to avoid the need of arguing against opponents—to break away from the convention of refuting or rebutting other views as a prelude to showing the superiority of one’s own. In a different reading of the rhetorical upshot of the method, it has been argued that it was employed as a form of caution, a device of self-restraint when dealing with views whose treatment in a less impersonal mode might have annoyed the public. 15

Whatever may have been Spinoza’s motivation, the geometrical style of the Ethics—daunting though it may initially be—need not be a barrier to modern readers’ access to the work. It is not necessary—and for most readers not even possible—to keep in mind, through a reading of the entire work, the intricate chains of demonstrative connections that purport to bind it together. The form of the work evokes the rationalist ideal of a mind capable of taking in, in one mental gaze, a deductive network of propositions. It may remind us, for example, of Descartes’s suggestion, in Rule 11 of his Rules for the Direction of the Mind, that thoughts which appear at first sight to be disconnected can, with training, become a unified object of a single intuition (Cottingham et al. 1985:37-9). But adequate comprehension of the Ethics does not demand such feats of intellectual gymnastics. We need not fear that we are missing something essential in not being able to take in as a whole the deductive interconnections—even if we had no doubts about their validity. Spinoza’s cross-referencing of the interconnections of theses and demonstrations can nonetheless be valuable aids to increased understanding of particular points.

The deductive structure which dominates the appearance of the Ethics, moreover, is in some ways misleading. The spirit of the rationalist ideal may pervade the whole work, but within that structure Spinoza’s rhetorical style is by no means uniformly ‘geometrical’. There is in fact little resemblance between reading the Ethics and reading Euclid. This is a work rich in irony; and Spinoza does not resist the occasional descent into sarcasm. It is also, as we shall see, a work rich in exercise of the imagination. Spinoza frequently resorts to ‘fictions’ to express philosophical insights. And we shall see too that, despite his rationalism, his theory of the relations between reason and supposedly lesser forms of knowledge provides a theoretical base for these exercises of the philosophical imagination. The work is also rich in emotional content. In the Preface to Part Three Spinoza prides himself on exploring in the manner traditionally reserved for the study of ‘lines, planes and solids’ the neglected domain of human passion, which has hitherto been regarded as not worthy of rational scrutiny. That the supposed ‘flaws’ and ‘aberrations’ in human nature are amenable to the same kind of rigorous investigations as the subject matter of geometry is indeed one of the insights conveyed by the geometrical form of the Ethics.

In the Scholia, and especially in the Prefaces and Appendices, Spinoza often provides extended discussion, free of the geometrical paraphernalia of the rest of the work. The Prefaces and Appendices function as an overview of the tighter, but also more cumbersome, expression of philosophical content in the more geometrical sections. Readers who find themselves initially lost in the detail of the propositions and proofs may find it helpful to read first the Prefaces and Appendices of each part, then the Scholia. Deleuze, in Spinoza: A
Practical Philosophy, suggests that these non-geometrical sections offer an alternative version of the work’s central themes. The Ethics, he says, ‘includes both the continuous set of propositions, demonstrations and corollaries as a grand movement of concepts, and the discontinuous sequence of scholia, as a launching of affects and impulses, a series of whirlwinds’ (Deleuze 1970:130). However serious Spinoza may have been about the ideal of the mind taking in the grand intellectual structure of the ‘order of thought’, epitomised in the structure of the Ethics, the truth is that for modern readers, after an initial unease, the geometrical form rapidly recedes from consciousness. ‘I read through a few pages’, says the character in Bernard Malamud’s novel, The Fixer, ‘and kept on going as though there were a whirlwind at my back… I didn’t understand every word but when you’re dealing with such ideas you feel as though you were taking a witch’s ride’ (Malamud 1967:70–1).

Having been reassured that we are just as likely to be taken on a witch’s ride as crushed by a dreadnought, what can we expect from undertaking the undoubted challenge of reading Spinoza? Despite a significant resurgence of interest in Spinoza among contemporary philosophers in recent years, this is not a text which figures centrally in the established canon of undergraduate philosophical education—at any rate in English-speaking universities. What can we hope for from the kernel of the almond? We shall see that there is much in the Ethics that can be assimilated into contemporary philosophical debate. There is also much that resists such assimilation. The work challenges contemporary professional philosophy’s sense of boundaries between different areas of philosophical enquiry. Politics, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind are interwoven in Spinoza’s philosophy. This is not primarily a work of moral philosophy.

Spinoza’s concept of ‘ethics’ embraces the collective powers and affinities of bodies. It is, as Deleuze suggests, in many ways more akin to the idea of ‘ethology’ than to what we now call ‘ethics’. And it cannot be separated out from Spinoza’s treatment of minds and bodies, of conatus, of the relations between parts and wholes.

Reading the Ethics can make us aware of the contingency of much of the content and practice of contemporary philosophy which we often take for granted. It can also jolt us into a perception of the contingency of our established, less reflective ways of thinking, and into a realisation of alternative possibilities for conceptualising contemporary social and political issues. Deleuze comments on the ‘dual role’ of Spinoza’s writing. This ‘most philosophic of philosophers’, commanding a highly developed, systematic and scholarly conceptual apparatus, can nonetheless be the ‘quintessential object of an immediate, unprepared encounter, such that a nonphilosopher, or even someone without any formal education, can receive a sudden illumination from him, a “flash”’ (Deleuze 1970:129). The Ethics is a work which has the capacity to bring together the sophisticated insights of scholarly philosophy and the untutored wisdom of ordinary life.

Spinoza stands in a distinctive relation to some of the dominant assumptions of Western thought—in some respects continuous with it, in others strikingly discontinuous. He is in many ways, as we have seen, a philosophical outsider—at odds with what became the philosophical mainstream and its manifestations in contemporary thought patterns. To read him is to glimpse unrealised possibilities of individual and collective self-consciousness—alternative ways of thinking of minds and bodies, of self and other, of personhood, agency and responsibility, of the relations between human beings and the rest of nature, between
reason and the passions; of power, dominance and difference. His treatment of freedom opens up space for rethinking the relations between individual and collective responsibility. His central concept of *conatus*—the striving to persist in and enhance being—has implications for the understanding of power and social relations which undercut more familiar oppositions between egoism and altruism, individual self-interest and communal goods. And his treatment of the mind as idea of the body, rather than as a separate,

intellectual substance, points towards new formulations of egalitarian ideals, grounded in the recognition of differences between the powers of socialised bodies, rather than the transcending or assimilation of difference in a universalised sameness. All this makes the *Ethics* particularly appropriate for the exercise of reading the history of philosophy as a source of cultural self-understanding in the present.

This book aims to guide new readers of Spinoza through the *Ethics*, offering assistance with its most bewildering passages, and providing sufficient information about controversial points of interpretation for readers to begin to form their own judgments about the work. Guidebooks can be read without being in the immediate presence of their subjects—dipped into for general orientation before we set out for unfamiliar places, or consulted in retrospect, when we are not sure what to make of what we have seen. This book can be read without constant reference to the text. But it follows the argumentative course of the *Ethics* and is best read as a complement to a direct engagement with Spinoza. No guidebook can substitute for the rich reality of the place it describes.

**The text**

The *Ethics* was included among several of Spinoza’s works published posthumously. It is useful in reading it to keep in mind some aspects of its relations to his other works, especially to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, which was published before his death. The *Ethics* was written, in Latin, over an extended period between 1661 and 1675. The *Theological-Political Treatise*, published in 1670, offers a rationalist basis for religious liberty, and attempts to extend to the interpretation of biblical texts the method developed by Descartes for explanation in the natural sciences. It was the hostile reception of that work which persuaded Spinoza that the *Ethics* should be published only after his death. The *Ethics* was included in the *Opera Posthuma*, published in 1677. Spinoza’s second political work, the *Political Treatise*, was written from 1675, and was unfinished at the time of his death.

Spinoza’s letters make it clear that he had already completed a substantial amount of the *Ethics* by the middle of 1665. Edwin Curley has suggested that in the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza was trying to convey some of his fundamental metaphysical principles to a more general audience, in preparation for the more rigorous presentation of his philosophy in the yet to be completed *Ethics*. Spinoza, Curley suggests, seems to have taken a lengthy break in the writing of the *Ethics*, between 1665 and 1670, at a time when he had an almost complete first draft of the *Ethics*—of which Parts One and Two seems to have changed little in its final version. Antonio Negri, writing of
the chronology of the texts in The Savage Anomaly, goes further, suggesting that the origin of the Theological-Political Treatise ‘plays an extraordinarily central role in the development of Spinoza’s thought as a whole’. Negri sees as highly significant the ‘interruption’ in the development of the Ethics between 1665 and 1670—the period when Spinoza drafted the Theological-Political Treatise. When Spinoza resumes work on the Ethics, its political content, with ‘all the wealth it represents for passion and ethical life’ is ‘re recuperated into the metaphysical discourse’. The full recognition of the importance of the interruption makes it impossible, Negri argues, to read the Ethics as a unitary work; the interruption is no mere parenthesis, but rather a ‘refoundation’. ‘With the Theological-Political Treatise it becomes logically clear that the world of imagination and history, or concretely the world of religion and politics, cannot be challenged from the perspective of rational theology and physics’ (Negri 1981:91).

Deleuze also comments on the significance of Spinoza’s interruption of the Ethics while he drafted the Theological-Political Treatise, attributing the temporary suspension of work on the Ethics directly to the political pressures arising from Spinoza’s ties with the republican party in its struggles with the monarchists. Spinoza’s friends, the de Witt brothers, were prominently associated with the republican cause. They were massacred by an angry mob in 1672—an event which prompted Spinoza to try to place a placard marking the site. The gesture—perhaps fortunately for the fate of the yet to be completed works and their author—was restrained by Spinoza’s anxious host. Deleuze comments on the contrast Spinoza saw between the ‘impassioned and bellicose behaviour of the monarchy’ and the ‘rational behaviour of a republic guided by a natural and geometric method, represented by Jan de Witt’ (Deleuze 1970:9-10). Spinoza’s turning to the issues of the Theological-Political Treatise can be seen, he suggests, as an expression of his concern with the mystery of the people’s continued allegiance to ‘intolerance and warmongering’. So we get a turning away from the metaphysical concerns of the drafted Ethics to such questions as: Why are the people so deeply irrational? Why are they proud of their own enslavement? Why do they fight ‘for’ their bondage as if it were their freedom? Why is it difficult not only to win but to bear freedom? Why does a religion that invokes love and joy inspire war, intolerance, hatred, malevolence, and remorse?

(Deleuze 1970:9-10)

Whether or not we accept Deleuze’s direct political explanation of the interruption, the insertion of the Theological-Political Treatise into the chronology of the writing of the Ethics should alert us to the importance for Spinoza of the relations between the metaphysical, the ethical and the political. Although there is little explicit discussion in the Ethics of the mysteries of ‘the multitude’, Spinoza’s concern with the relations between imagination and reason can fruitfully be seen as reflecting a wider concern with the challenge posed to the idealised rational mind by the power of illusion and fantasy. On this issue, as we shall see, hang many of the most important differences among interpretations of the Ethics.

It is also useful to keep in mind three other works of Spinoza. In 1663 he published Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy, Parts I and II—a commentary to which was appended a
short commentary on scholastic doctrine, the *Metaphysical Thoughts*. In the commentary on the *Principles* we see the closeness of Spinoza’s early relations with Cartesianism, although even here there are intimations of the dramatic transformations of Cartesianism which will occur in the *Ethics*. Curley, in his edition of the collected works, follows the Italian scholar Filippo Mignini in placing the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* before the *Short Treatise*, which was previously thought to be Spinoza’s first work. The work of Mignini is now widely accepted as establishing that the *Short Treatise* should be thought of as a mature composition and indeed as a prototype of the *Ethics*.


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**Chapter 2**

**God, minds and bodies**

The rich and challenging content of Spinoza’s whole philosophical system unfolds from his novel treatment, at the very beginning of the *Ethics*, of concepts related to the old philosophical ideal of substance—the idea of self-contained, independent being. The eight opening definitions of Part One highlight the connections between the metaphysics of substance and themes of freedom, necessity and eternity, setting the agenda for the work as a whole; and the seven axioms that immediately follow introduce principles which not only tell us how to think of the basic concepts of the definitions but also guide the reasoning processes of the entire work. In the definitions we can already see some unusual conjunctions of concepts: freedom and necessity, eternity and the existence of substance. What exists from the necessity of its own nature is ‘determined to act by itself alone’ and hence ‘free’. And eternity, rather than evoking transcendence, becomes the very existence of substance—reality itself, construed under attributes. The opening axioms highlight another central theme: the necessary correspondence between thought and reality. What is true of reality is true also of thought: what *is* in itself must be conceived through itself. If we approach the correspondence from the other direction, the point is that a thing cannot be necessary if it can be conceived as not existing; the essence of such a thing does not involve its existence. Spinoza’s axioms about causal relations also reflect this conviction of the necessary correspondence between thought and reality: the relations of dependence between what causes and what is caused are reflected in corresponding relations between the knowledge of effects and the knowledge of causes—the one is ‘understood through’ the other.
In addition to the ‘being in’ relation, which binds things together, and the ‘thinking through’ relation, which binds their concepts together, the axioms introduce us to another crucial relation—that between ideas and things. This is not a causal relation but a relation of agreement: truth is a matter of agreement between idea and object. These three sets of relations—between things, between ideas, and between ideas and things—underpin the structure of the *Ethics*. The conviction that thought and reality—ideas and objects—must agree is one of the things that makes it appropriate to describe Spinoza as a rationalist. From the opening sections of the *Ethics*, it may appear that Spinoza has simply assumed this rationalist principle without justification. It is not itself stated as a self-evident definition or axiom. But we shall see that it is grounded in what he sees as the implications of concepts of substance, attribute and divine plenitude—in the idea of God as a being possessing an infinity of attributes.

The concept of God is at the centre of the *Ethics*. But what manner of God is this? Spinoza’s language in talking of God has continuities with older theological traditions. God is to be understood as a substance—as something the understanding of which requires no other concept. This is ‘a being absolutely infinite’. Substance is ‘cause of itself; its essence involves existence. Spinoza talks of it in ways that echo also earlier ideas of the fullness or plenitude of divine perfection. His God is the fullest of beings—‘a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence’. But Spinoza’s version of the divine attributes pushes his philosophy in a new direction. God, the world and the human mind here enter new and unorthodox relations.

Spinoza himself regarded his treatment of the attributes as highly controversial. In a letter to Oldenberg, of April 1662, he mentions it—along with the fact that he does not separate God from nature—as one of the aspects of his philosophy most likely to attract the hatred of the theologians. He regards as creatures, he says there, many things which they treat as attributes of God. Conversely, other things which they, out of prejudice, regard as creatures, he regards as attributes of God (Curley 1985:188). For Spinoza thought and extension are not created by God; they are attributes of God himself. Spinoza’s divine attributes are not the traditional properties of God—benevolence, omnipotence or omniscience; they are ways in which God as substance can be understood—‘what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence’. The divine attributes cease to be properties of a transcendent God and become instead ways in which reality is construed, articulated or expressed.

It is in this relation of ‘expression’ between God and his attributes that we most clearly see what is distinctive about Spinoza’s idea of God. Gilles Deleuze, in *Expressionism in Philosophy*, relates it to the expressive power of verbs, in contrast to the more passive role of adjectives characteristic of mere properties. Spinoza’s attributes are dynamic. Substance expresses itself; the attributes are its expressions. The term ‘expression’, Deleuze suggests, in this context has implicit in it two traditional metaphors: the idea of the mirror, reflecting images, and that of the germ or seed which expresses the tree (Deleuze 1968:80). Spinoza’s attributes are mirrors, each expressing in its own way the essence of substance. But what is ‘expressed’ is also enveloped in the expression, like the tree in the seed. This is no passive reflection, but an active, dynamic articulation.
God and ‘his’ attributes

The early propositions of Part One take us to the heart of the work: the unity and uniqueness of God as substance. The astonishing thing, for a modern reader, is that Spinoza clearly takes himself to have shown—even to minds giving only ‘mediocre attention’ to his argument—not only that God, if he existed, would be a unique substance, infinite under an infinity of attributes, but that such a God does indeed exist. To a modern ear, there is something zany about Spinoza’s argumentation for God’s existence at IP11: ‘If you think God does not exist’, Spinoza seems to be saying, ‘just try thinking of him as nonexistent! What would it be that could stop him existing? Anything strong enough for that would have to be God. So, if he doesn’t exist, it must be himself that stops him existing. And then his nature would involve a contradiction.’

Has Spinoza really proved the existence of God? We may well wonder here whether we are in the presence of outrageous arguments for the existence of something resembling the God of traditional Judaic and Christian theology, or rather an elaborate commonplace, given all the trappings of religion. Spinoza presents us with the idea of a perfect being—a unity of different attributes. But does he really show that such a being exists? His argument that there cannot be more than one substance sharing a common attribute has been seen by modern commentators as less than persuasive. But, even if we grant that part of the proof, it is not obvious that he has demonstrated the existence of a being that has all the attributes. Two things—both less accessible to us than to his contemporaries—help make his reasoning more plausible: the magnetism of the traditional theological idea of the plenitude of divine being, and the distinctive character of Spinoza’s approach to definition.

It may seem at first sight that we have here a particularly brash version of the ontological argument, readily refuted by Kant’s famous challenge in the Critique of Pure Reason. No perfection in the content of an idea, Kant insisted, allows us to move from that content to its instantiation. We cannot argue from the definition of God as an absolutely necessary being to the conclusion that he exists. The real contains no more content than the merely possible. ‘A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers’ (Kant 1787:505). The actual existence of an object, whatever it may be, is never analytically contained in its concept but is added to it synthetically. ‘And yet the conceived hundred thalers are not themselves in the least increased through thus acquiring existence outside my concept’ (Kant 1787:505). Does the vivid idea of divine plenitude mask an illicit move from the concept of perfection to its instantiation? To be able to exist, Spinoza reasons, is to have power; and to be able not to exist is to lack power. The more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more power it has of itself to exist. So God, as absolutely infinite being, has an absolutely infinite power of existing. God thus exists absolutely. Has Spinoza illicitly conjured the existence of a perfect being out of its definition?
It is important here to see how crucial the relation between substance and its attributes is to Spinoza’s argumentation. It follows from his definition of God and his attributes that, wherever we are considering God, we are considering him under an attribute. Wherever we have actually existing substance given for our consideration, we have it given under an attribute—rendered intelligible or construable by intellect. But God is for Spinoza a unity of different attributes. This should make us wary about thinking of Spinoza’s proof of God’s existence as moving from a concept to its instantiation in the way criticised in Kant’s rejection of the ontological argument. All that is ever given for consideration is God-under-an-attribute—not God-as-an-infinity-of-attributes. But it is this God-of-many-attributes that we nonetheless consider under any one of them.

Spinoza’s approach to definition in the Ethics has a concreteness which we must keep in mind if we are to understand his proof of God’s existence. The point becomes clearer in an exchange between Spinoza and his friend de Vries—the spokesman for a group of readers in Amsterdam who studied an early draft of Part One of the Ethics and communicated to Spinoza their difficulties with the proofs. Spinoza, responding to de Vries’s queries, distinguishes two kinds of definition. On the one hand there are, he says, definitions which ‘serve to explain a thing whose essence only is sought, as the only thing there is doubt about’ and, on the other hand, those which are ‘proposed only to be examined’. Because a definition of the first kind has a ‘determinate object’, it ‘ought to be true’. A definition of the latter kind, in contrast, does not require truth. If we keep in mind this aspect of the Part One definitions—that they are concerned with ‘determinate objects’ whose ‘essence’ only is at issue, the question of existence having been put out of contention—the ‘proofs’ in the opening sections take on a new dimension. Without it, these sections may well seem arbitrary and dogmatic. Rather than illicitly presuming the existence of a God conjured up in his definition, Spinoza has in effect put the issue of existence out of contention.

Is Spinoza entitled thus to put out of contention such a fundamental element of the work as a whole? Let us pursue his comments on definition in the letter to de Vries a little further. A definition, he continues, either explains a thing as it is ‘outside the intellect’—and then it ‘ought to be true’—or it explains a thing only as we conceive it or can conceive it—and then it need not be conceived as true. Spinoza offers, as an example of this latter kind of definition, the description of a temple which someone might want to build, from which can be inferred the amount of land or materials to be purchased if the project were to be carried out. In contrast, there is the description of the Temple of Solomon, where truth is demanded. If I feign a chimera, says Spinoza, imaginary properties may be inferred from my description. But there is here no external constraint of truth—only the demands of internal consistency. Spinoza’s point is that, if one is describing a chimera, no matter how many attributes it is given, a gap remains between its definition and its existence. Nothing compels me to regard it as existing. In defining God, in contrast, he is defining a ‘determinate object’. But why is he so confident that his definition of God is of the Temple of Solomon variety? Why should we accept that Spinoza’s God is not a chimera of his own feigning? Has Spinoza not already assumed the existence of his substance-of-many-attributes in treating his definition as applying to something ‘outside the intellect’—something given as a determinate object?
The difficulty here is that we seem to have in Spinoza’s definition of God a hybrid of the two kinds of approach to definition. God-under-an-attribute is a determinate object—thought or matter. But the God-of-many-attributes is not given to us as a determinate object. Even if we grant Spinoza his version of definition as the description of the essence of a determinate object, whose existence is out of contention, why should we grant him that the substance given to us for consideration as a determinate object under one attribute has any other attributes—much less an infinity of them—not given to us?

Here again Spinoza’s exchange with de Vries is instructive; for it was de Vries who first raised this much-discussed problem of the unity of Spinoza’s attributes. The context of de Vries’s letter to Spinoza makes it clear that his reading group were not only sympathetic readers but dedicated disciples, seeking Spinoza’s assistance in increasing their ability to ‘defend the truth against those who are superstitiously religious and Christian, and to stand against the attacks of the whole world’ (Curley 1985:190). But they are puzzled about Spinoza’s seemingly unjustified claim at IP10S that, although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct, they do not on that account constitute two substances, since it is the nature of substance that all of its attributes should be conceived through themselves. In response Spinoza says that the demonstration he judges best for treating a substance as able to have more than one attribute is that the more attributes we attribute to a being, the more we are compelled to attribute existence to it; that is, the more we conceive it as true. It would be quite the contrary, he says, if he had ‘feigned a Chimaera, or something like that’ (Curley 1985:195).

Spinoza’s point is that the more determinate we make the object of our definition, the more evident it is that here the issue of truth matters—the more our definition ‘ought to be true’. The more determinate an object is—the more attributes it has—the more committed we are to its being something that really exists. So the appearance of dogmatism is dissolved—not by closer attention to the content of the definition, but by closer attention to the speech acts which frame the giving of the definition. How, we may ask, does the object of definition become more ‘determinate’ by having added to it an infinity of attributes which have themselves no determinate content? But this is to think of attributes as additional properties, rather than as additional ways in which substance can be construed. In thinking of this substance—palpably given under one attribute—as something that can be construed in an infinity of other ways, we confront, in Spinoza’s sense, a more determinate object—one whose existence could not conceivably be in question.

Even if we remain unpersuaded by Spinoza’s proof of the existence of his God, it is crucial, if we are to appreciate the ethical consequences which Spinoza will later derive from his metaphysics, that we have some understanding of the distinctive character of this way of thinking of God’s relations to his attributes. The attributes are really distinct from one another—quite separate ways in which substance becomes intelligible—yet unified as attributes of the one substance, necessarily and totally expressed under each of them. Martial Guéroult, in his masterly study of the *Ethics*, has persuasively demonstrated the ‘objective’ nature of the distinction between the attributes. An alternative interpretation, presenting the attributes as only subjectively distinct from one another, is sketched in Harry Wolfson’s
On this ‘subjective’ interpretation, favoured by Wolfson, the reference to the intellect in Spinoza’s definition of the attributes is taken as implying that the attributes are different not in themselves but only in the mind’s perception of them (Wolfson 1934:142-57).

If the attributes are, as Wolfson suggests, only subjectively different from one another, there is no difficulty about how they are really united in the one substance. Guéroult, having insisted—in the view of most recent commentary, rightly—on the real difference of the attributes, must then offer an account of how they are united in the one substance. His illuminating suggestion is that we can best understand this by comparing it with the union of mind and body in Descartes’s version of a human being. But, whereas for Descartes that union rests on the contingent fact that human beings exist, the unity of Spinoza’s attributes rests on the necessary existence of God. His God is a union—not a mere aggregation—of attributes. Although the attributes of Spinoza’s God are separately conceivable—and indeed really distinct—they are, unlike mind and body in the Cartesian human being, absolutely inseparable. We have here a ‘substantial union’ which is neither a ‘fusion’ nor a ‘mixture’. The attributes are ‘without common measure’ and ‘infinitely different’, but they are necessarily united.

The intricacies of Guéroult’s comparisons between Spinoza’s God and the Cartesian human being are the subject of an interesting paper by Alan Donagan on ‘Essence and the Distinction of Attributes in Spinoza’s Metaphysics’. In his later book, Spinoza, Donagan returns to the issue raised by de Vries’s original query: how do we distinguish between a world containing a multiplicity of substances of one attribute and a world consisting of a single substance with many attributes? These issues are fascinating and complex. As Donagan points out, a radical de Vries, less inclined than the historical one to believe already in a perfect God, would be also less inclined to concede that Spinoza has provided a coherent basis for supposing that all his attributes are unified in the one substance (Donagan 1973:179). Yet the attributes must be unified in a way that can explain the correspondence between modes of different attributes—the doctrine that plays such a crucial role in the Ethics as a whole. The position of many modern readers of Spinoza is of course not unlike that of this supposed radical de Vries. Why should we suppose that there are an infinity of attributes, additional to thought and extension, to which our intellects have no access? And, even if we grant that there may be, why should we grant that all these attributes are unified in the one substance?

Collingwood, in The Idea of Nature, articulated the bewilderment that Spinoza’s doctrine of the unity of the attributes induces in a modern reader, not attuned, as de Vries was, to the traditional idea of God as the most real of beings. Spinoza’s attributes of thought and extension, he complains, seem to be held together ‘by main force’. Spinoza, he says, can give no reason why what is extended should also think, and vice versa. The theory remains ‘a mere assertion of brute fact’ (Collingwood 1945:106). But it is important to remember here that the point of Spinoza’s version of the ens realissimum doctrine is, not that God has more properties than anything else, but rather that he is, in the strongest possible sense, all that there is. No matter how intellect construes reality, it confronts an expression of God or substance. Reality, if it is understood at all, is understood under an attribute. Bertrand Russell captured something of the spirit of Spinoza’s commitment to the infinite multiplicity of
attributes in his *Lectures on Logical Atomism*: we should not, he says, let our familiarity with mind and matter blind us to the possibility that there may be a multiplicity of other ways of understanding reality.

One should always remember Spinoza’s infinite attributes of Deity. It is likely that there are in the world the analogues of his infinite attributes. We have no acquaintance with them, but there is no reason to suppose that the mental and the physical exhaust the whole universe… You do not know enough about the world for that.

(Russell 1918:84)

The rationale for Spinoza’s commitment to attributes inaccessible to us will become clearer in the light of his treatment of the ‘mind of God’. And what difference it makes that reality consists of a substance of many attributes—rather than a multiplicity of substances each with one—will become clearer when we see his treatment, in Part Two, of the mind as the idea of the body.

**God and the world**

Is Spinoza a pantheist? It is true that he claims that anything extended or thinking must be either an attribute of God or a modification of God under one of his attributes. There is, after all, nothing else for it to be; since, apart from God conceived under attributes, there is nothing (IP14 and C2). But this does not mean that Spinoza thinks that God and the world are identical. To claim that would be to leave out of account the infinity of other attributes under which God is expressed. It would also be to overlook that even God-under-the-attribute-of-extension cannot be identified strictly with the material world. That world is of course ‘divisible’; it has parts. But Spinoza insists that ‘no attribute of a substance can be truly conceived from which it follows that the substance can be divided’, and that a substance which is absolutely infinite is indivisible (IP12 and P13). It would seem then that his God cannot be identified with the world.

There would in any case be little appeal in a pantheism that saw God and world as interchangeable. Pantheism—where it is not a term of disapprobation, for doctrines which supposedly reduce the being of God to something less than his entitlements—exalts the material world to something greater than our initial expectations of it. Paradoxically, God must be something more than the world for it to be worth the bother of elevating the world to his status. What is distinctive about Spinoza’s way of thinking of the relations between world and God is that, although God is not identified with the world, he is ‘expressed’ under each of his attributes—extension included—in such a way that nothing of his being escapes that expression. Since each attribute captures, in its own unique way, not just part of his being but all of it, there is nothing of God—none of his content, as it were—that is unexpressed under the attribute of extension. Just as the whole content of the same proposition can be expressed either in English or in French, so the whole content of God is expressed under all the attributes. The analogy here is only partial; for there is nothing
comparable to the problems of translating without loss between languages. But it does bring out the force of Spinoza’s insistence that God is totally expressed under the attribute of extension, although he is not identified with the outcome of that expression.

Nothing, says Spinoza, can be more absurd than to think of God as corporeal. Yet, for all that, extended substance is itself one of God’s infinite attributes. Corporeal substance cannot be removed from the divine nature, as if it were created by a God who transcends it (IP15S1). What prevents this from being the contradiction it may at first appear is that, although the material world is of course divisible, ‘extended substance’, insofar as it is substance, is not divisible (IP15S4). We might expect Spinoza to say that, although substance is not divisible, its expression under the attribute of extension is. But that would be to treat the ‘expression’ too much like a creation—a causal product of substance. What he does instead is to deny that corporeal substance, considered as substance, is divisible.

Why then do we think of corporeal substance as divisible? And where in this array of concepts is it appropriate to locate the material world? The answers to both questions involve the distinction between intellect and imagination. Corporeal substance—substance under the attribute of extension—is not composed of finite parts (IP15S2, 3 and 4). So it might seem that corporeal substance, whatever it might be, is something other than the material world familiar to us in ordinary experience. But this is not Spinoza’s position. Rather, what is known by intellect as indivisible corporeal substance, appears to the imagination as the divisible world of finite parts. Matter, says Spinoza, is really ‘everywhere the same’ and parts are distinguished in it only insofar as we consider matter to be ‘affected in different ways, so that its parts are distinguishable only modally, not really’ (IP15S5).

Spinoza’s illustration of this claim is striking. We conceive, he says, that water is divided and its parts separate from one another, insofar as it is water, but not insofar as it is corporeal substance. ‘Again, water, insofar as it is water, is generated and corrupted, but insofar as it is substance, it is neither generated nor corrupted’ (IP15C5). Rather than saying that water is not corporeal substance, Spinoza distinguishes between water, insofar as it is substance, and water, insofar as it is water. The location ‘water, insofar as it is water’ may sound strange. The distinction between imagination and intellect is crucial here. Water is water, only so far as it appears to the imagination. Insofar as it is known by the intellect it is ‘corporeal substance’. Water then depends on the human imagination. But this does not mean that it is an illusion. The full story of the role of imagination in the constitution of the world of ‘finite parts’ must wait until the concluding sections of Part Two. What is important to see here in Part One is that it is not part of Spinoza’s view that matter is ‘unworthy of the divine nature’. Even if matter is supposed to be divisible, it can be said to be part of God’s nature, so long as it is granted to be ‘eternal and infinite’ (IP15C6). Matter is ‘supposed to be divisible’ by the imagination, and ‘known to be eternal and infinite’ by the intellect. The two do not cancel one another out; although, as we shall see later, Spinoza, as a good—even if ambivalent—rationalist, thinks that intellect is a higher form of knowledge than imagination.

Guérout suggested the term ‘panentheism’, rather than ‘pantheism’ to describe Spinoza’s view of the relation between God and the world. The world is not God; but it is, in a strong sense, ‘in’ God. Not only do finite things have God as their cause; they cannot be conceived
without God. The challenge for modern readers is to grasp the closeness of this relation, which allows the world to be ‘in’ God, without collapsing either world into God or God into world. R. S. Woolhouse, in a helpful discussion of the complexities of Spinoza’s treatment of substance, stresses that the world is for Spinoza not extended substance but a mode of the attribute of extension—something which can neither be nor be conceived without God as extended substance. But, although we need to acknowledge the difference between God—as a being of infinite attributes—and the world of finite things, we need also to do justice to the closeness of the relationship between Spinoza’s God and any of his ‘expressions’ in the totality of finite modes. Woolhouse presents the reality of Spinoza’s extended substance as different from that of any ‘existent instantiation of extension’. Extended substance, he suggests, is ‘a reality of a kind which underwrites the possibility of actual instantiations of extension, of actual extended things’ (Woolhouse 1993:50).

Woolhouse’s formulation helps us avoid what is misleading in the interpretation of Spinoza as a pantheist. It is undoubtedly true that Spinoza’s ‘material substance’ cannot be identified with any actually extended finite thing. Nor can it be identified with the totality of such finite things. The world as that totality is, unlike God, divisible. But it is important to note that, if Spinoza’s God is a reality which underwrites the possibility of the material world, it is not because there is something essential to his nature which does not find total expression in that world. Whatever is real in this God is real under all its attributes. ‘From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)’ (IP16). 8 There is in this God no reality which fails to find expression under each of his attributes, extension included. What stops God from collapsing into the material world is, not that there is something of him held back from expression in the world as totality of finite modes of extension, but precisely that no one of his attributes can claim exclusive identification with him. Our world is not God. But, within that world, we are ‘in’ him in the strongest possible sense. Without that close connection between God and the world we inhabit, Spinoza, as we shall see, could not go on to draw the significant ethical consequences of his metaphysics of substance and modes.

The mind and will of God

All dependent things—or ‘modes’—follow necessarily from the eternal attributes of God. But there are two ways in which this happens. There are, on the one hand, modes which, though dependent on God, are themselves infinite. Such modes follow from the ‘absolute nature’ of one of God’s attributes; and, like those attributes, they are eternal. On the other hand, there are finite modes which, although they follow from the eternal attributes, are not themselves eternal. Each finite mode is limited by other finite modes. The relation of dependence between finite modes and substance is mediated through the infinite modes. As examples of the eternal infinite modes, Spinoza offered—in response to a request for elucidation from his German correspondents Tschirnhaus and Schuller, in July 1675—‘in thought, absolutely infinite intellect, and in extension, motion and rest’ (Curley 1994:271). Tschirnhaus and Schuller, who had read the manuscript version of the Ethics, had themselves suggested, for Spinoza’s endorsement, thought and extension, as examples of God’s immediate products;
intellect and motion, as examples of things produced mediately through some infinite modification (Curley 1994:270). Clearly, this would be to confuse the infinite modes with the attributes themselves. In responding, Spinoza suggests instead, ‘the face of the whole universe, which (face), although it varies in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same’ (Curley 1994:272).

We will see this important but obscure notion of the ‘face’ of the universe again in Spinoza’s outline of his physics of bodies in Part Two—the idea of the ‘whole of nature’ as ‘one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual’ (II.7S). The point of the metaphor of the face here is presumably that the universe remains the same through change, just as the human face can assume a range of expressions. One commentator, however, has suggested that Spinoza’s term facies can be here translated as ‘fashion’ or ‘make’ (Hallett 1957:32). Spinoza’s choice of example is no doubt designed to rectify his correspondents’ misconstrual of thought and extension as themselves infinite modes. It echoes Spinoza’s rather confusing discussion at IP21D of ‘God’s idea in thought’ as illustration of a putative finite mode supposedly following from the absolute nature of the attribute of thought. But it remains unclear exactly how Spinoza’s single example of the face is supposed to clarify the relations between ‘absolutely infinite intellect’ and the mediated modes of thought.

What is of more consequence, however, is the innovative, and in some ways bewildering, general status of the divine intellect in Spinoza’s system. In the concluding sections of Part One, he tells us that, if intellect pertained to the divine nature, it would have to be no more like our intellect than the dog that is a heavenly constellation is like the dog that is a barking animal (IP17S2). Whereas our intellect is ‘posterior to’ or ‘simultaneous with’ the things it understands, God’s intellect would have to be ‘prior to’ things understood. For such a God, it is not the case that he knows something because that is the way it is; rather, the truth is what it is because it exists ‘objectively’ in that way in God’s intellect. The point of all this is not that there pertains to God’s essence a special and superior version of our kind of intellect. The point is rather that what we call ‘intellect’ does not at all pertain to God’s essence, insofar as he is conceived as a ‘free cause’—as Natura Naturans, in Spinoza’s terminology. God as Natura Naturans is creative, productive thought—not a mind that strives, as the human mind does, to bring itself into relation with a pre-existing truth. Spinoza’s God is the cause of the essences of things no less than of their existence. As Natura Naturans, God does not confront extraneous objects in an act of intellectual understanding. There is nothing outside him.

Wherever there is intellect we are in the domain of God, not as ‘free cause’—Natura Naturans,—but as Natura Naturata—‘modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God’ (IP29S). Even what Spinoza calls the ‘infinite intellect’ is a mode of God; but, because it follows ‘directly’ from the attribute, it is itself infinite and eternal. Intellect and will do not pertain to the nature of God as Natura Naturans any more than motion and rest do. Like motion and rest, they are effects of the causal power of substance. The consequences for traditional theological ideas of God are immense. What Spinoza calls the ‘mind of God’ is not a repository of ideas from which a benevolent being chooses what he will make real. This mind is itself
a product of God’s power, which necessarily expresses itself in an infinity of ways and modes.

There are various interpretations of what is included in this ‘mind of God’ of which the human mind is said to be part. Indeed its content seems to vary throughout the Ethics. In Part Two, it seems to be a correlate under the attribute of thought of the unified totality of modes of extension Spinoza calls the ‘face of the whole universe’. But, as we have already seen, there is a reference to intellect built into the very definition of all the attributes. Is there then a separate ‘mind of God’ corresponding to the understanding of each attribute? Or does one infinite intellect apprehend them all? Donagan suggests that the ‘infinite intellect of God’ consists of an infinity of infinite ideas of himself, one for each attribute beside thought, and an infinity of accompanying ideas of each such idea—‘an infinity of really distinct infinite minds’ (Donagan 1988:118-19). But if there is indeed an infinity of really distinct infinite minds, why talk of ‘the infinite intellect of God’ at all?

In another response to Tschirnhaus’s query about why the mind cannot know attributes other than thought and extension, Spinoza offers the following elaboration:

although each thing is expressed in infinite ways in the infinite intellect of God, nevertheless those infinite ideas by which it is expressed cannot constitute one and the same mind of a singular thing, but infinitely many minds, since each of these infinite ideas has no connection with any other…. If you will attend a bit to these things, you will see that no difficulty remains.

(Curley 1994:273)

Fortunately for those of us for whom it remains unclear that the difficulty has been removed, even after ‘attending a bit’, the rest of the Ethics does not depend on a resolution of the question whether there is one or an infinite number of ‘infinite intellects’. Since wherever there is intellection what is at stake is the realm of Natura Naturata—the realm of modes of God under some attribute or other—even God cannot be said to understand himself under the infinity of his own attributes. Spinoza’s God does not have knowledge of a kind which we are in principle denied. This is just one of the ways in which Spinoza has parted company with the transcendent God of traditional theology.

What of the divine will? The same arguments that remove determinate acts of intellection from God’s nature apply also, Spinoza thinks, to the will; and this means that God does not act from free will. God cannot be said to act from free will, any more than he can be said to act from freedom of motion and rest (IP32C2). Wherever we have a determinate act of will, we are again in the realm of modes. The causal power of an act of will is mediated through other finite modes. Things could be different only if God’s nature, from which they necessarily follow, were different. But that is impossible. Things are called contingent only because of a defect in our knowledge of the order of causes (IP33S1). God’s supposed free will is for Spinoza in fact inconsistent with his freedom. God’s freedom does not consist in an
'absolute will' (IP33S2). It is the freedom of a ‘free cause’, acting from the necessity of a nature which includes neither will nor intellect.

In the appendix to Part One, Spinoza delivers a scathing attack on the idea of God as a transcendent creator with benign purposes and on popular ‘prejudices’ about the freedom of human beings and their place in the natural world. Both targets are products, he argues, of imagination rather than of intellect. His diagnosis of these ‘prejudices’ that stand in the way of ready acceptance of his own demonstrations of the nature of God provides a transition between the concerns of Part One and the treatment of the human mind and its operations in Part Two.

The style of the appendix is savagely ironic. But there are also in these passages overtones of a reverential respect for the new version of God. The awe with which traditional theology—in the grip of illusions of the imagination—responded to the idea of a transcendent God is appropriated to the intellectual understanding of necessity. Spinoza’s God has no purposes—no interest in or concern for human well-being. But the emotional resonances of this radical version of the consciousness of God are neither indifferent nor cynical. Already we are given intimations of the ‘intellectual love of God’ which will come as the climax of the Ethics. This appendix, both in its style and in its content, begins the movement of thought which will take us from the distortions of the imagination to the exercise of the highest form of knowledge in the intellectual love of God.

In the appendix Spinoza grounds his repudiation of popular prejudices about God and free will in an observation it is not easy to reject: ‘that all men are born ignorant of the causes of things, and that they all want to seek their own advantage, and are conscious of this appetite.’ The belief in free will, which Spinoza will present in Part Two as a paradigm of human error, arises, he says, from the fact that human beings are conscious of their volitions and appetites but are prevented by ignorance from thinking ‘even in their dreams’ of the causes disposing them to ‘wanting and willing’. In his response to queries from Tschirnhaus in 1674 (Letter 58), Spinoza illustrates the point through a thought experiment. Suppose, he suggests, a stone set in motion by an external cause, thinking, and knowing that as far as it can it strives to continue to move:

Of course since the stone is conscious only of its striving, and not at all indifferent, it will believe itself to be free, and to persevere in motion for no other cause than because it wills to. …And this is that famous human freedom which everyone brags of having, and which consists only in this: that men are conscious of their appetites and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined.

(Curley 1994:267-8)

Our ignorance of causes, in conjunction with our awareness of our own self-seeking, yields the tendency to see natural things as means purposefully provided for our advantage. God is construed—on the view ridiculed in the appendix—as directing the whole of nature according to human needs. Nature and the gods become ‘as mad as men’. Nature, seen by the standards of truth made available through mathematics—concerned with essences and properties rather
than ‘ends’—has no purposes. And ‘final causes’ are ‘human fictions’. All things proceed with the greatest perfection by ‘a certain eternal necessity of nature’.

Irony and reverence come together here in Spinoza’s startling insistence that to think of God as acting for the sake of an end takes away his perfection. If God acted for the sake of an end, he reasons, he would necessarily want something which he lacks. Spinoza presents the preoccupation with illusory final causes and the belief in divine will which accompanies it as a retreat to the ‘sanctuary of ignorance’. Ignorance breeds ‘foolish wonder’ and the rejection of those who seek to reach true understanding of causes as ‘impious heretics’. In the concluding sections of the appendix, Spinoza addresses an issue which will be central to the structure of the whole work—the misguided view of good and evil which results from mistaking the deliverances of imagination for intellect. We take for order, beauty and harmony, what is in fact nothing but a congenial relation to our own imagination. The notions by which ‘ordinary people’ are accustomed to explain nature are only ‘modes of imagining’, indicating not the nature of anything but only the constitution of our own imagination.

The climax of Spinoza’s exposure of popular prejudices in the appendix comes with his powerful dissolution of the traditional problem of evil: ‘why are there so many imperfections in nature? why are things corrupt to the point where they stink? so ugly that they produce nausea? why is there confusion, evil, and sin?’ Here dark irony passes over into exhilaration. Spinoza’s answer is that things are not more or less perfect because they are of use to, or are incompatible with, human nature. To those who ask for reasons here, Spinoza’s sardonic reply—mocking the language of purpose—is:

because he did not lack material to create all things, from the highest degree of perfection to the lowest; or, to speak more properly, because the laws of his nature have been so ample that they sufficed for producing all things which can be conceived by an infinite intellect.

(IAPP)

There is in Spinoza’s philosophy no room for a distinction between what is possible and what comes to be actual. Nor, as we shall see, is there any distinction between God’s understanding of what is possible and his choosing to make it real. Whatever can be will be. There is no reason for some things to exist rather than others. But in moving from imagination to intellect—from the illusion that

there are ends in nature or purposes in God—we move from a self-centred view of our place in nature to a liberating recognition that the perfection of things is to be judged from their own nature rather than ours.

The idea of the body
From the consideration of infinite substance we now move in Part Two to the consideration of the existence proper to modes—from the mind of God to the finite existence of the human mind. But the totality which encompasses individual existence never recedes completely from Spinoza’s vision. There are two vantage points from which Spinoza invites us now to consider minds and bodies. On the one hand, we have thought and extension, united as attributes of the same substance expressed in an infinite totality of modes—the ‘order and connection of thought’ matching the ‘order and connection of things’. On the other, we have the relations between idea and object, which hold across these different attributes.

The ethical orientation of Spinoza’s treatment of individuality is made clear from the start. From the infinitely many things which follow from the essence of God as infinite and eternal being, he will explain, he says in the introductory comments to Part Two, those which ‘lead us, by the hand as it were, to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness’. As in Part One, the definitions alert us to the central themes which follow: the modal status of individuals, the active dynamic character of ideas, truth and adequacy, time, perfection. The axioms take us straight to the central fact of human existence as Spinoza sees it—the theme which was stressed in the immediately preceding appendix—that we are part of nature, inserted into it as modifications of a substance whose causal force is mediated through an infinity of other such modifications. As modes of God’s thought, our minds follow from the necessity of God’s nature. They are consequences of God’s self-understanding no less than all the other infinitely many things which follow from him in infinitely many modes (IIP3S). But the perspective from which we are now invited to consider this truth is from within the totality—as finite modes of thought, feeling the modifications of body.

The relation of mind to body is thus framed both by Spinoza’s doctrine of the sameness of substance thinking and substance extended, and by the relation between ideas and their objects. In medieval thought that relation had also often been articulated as a kind of sameness—as a unity of the object, considered as known, and the act of intellect in knowing. In bringing that doctrine together with his own doctrine of the uniqueness of substance, Spinoza once more gives a new twist to an old theme. The fact that a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing expressed in two ways is, he tells us, a truth seen ‘as if through a cloud’ by some of the Hebrews, who maintained that ‘God, God’s intellect, and the things understood by him are one and the same’ (IIP7S). As we saw in passing in chapter 1 the doctrine was expressed by Maimonides, in the Guide for the Perplexed, in terms of the unity of the ‘active intellect’ and the object qua known, and also by Aquinas in the Summa Theologiae. Spinoza’s treatment of mind thus incorporates older ideas of esse intentionale—the kind of being that things come to have in thought. But for Spinoza this way of thinking of minds and bodies is not just a way of articulating what happens when minds know bodies. The unity of ideas and their objects arises from the unfolding of God’s necessary being under different attributes; and it holds across the whole network of finite modes. It does not depend on anything peculiar to the human mind’s operations in knowledge. It is not a matter of an already existing object coming to have ‘intentional’ existence in the knowing mind. Individual minds and bodies alike are caught up in a prior unity of ‘substance extended’ and ‘substance thinking’, although of course minds and bodies—as finite modes under irreducibly different attributes—remain distinct.

Spinoza here brings into explicit connection themes from the earlier tradition which had common roots in Aristotle’s notion of the ‘active intellect’. In the Metaphysics (Book XII, Ch.
9), Aristotle describes the divine intellect as thinking of itself because there is, after all, nothing more perfect of which it might think. In some later versions of the self-thinking active intellect, what was emphasised was the participation of the human mind in a wider thinking thing. In others, the emphasis was on the unity of knowing act and known object. For Spinoza this restatement and reunification of older philosophical themes yields novel ways of thinking, both of the relations between individual minds and bodies, and of truth and error. Their common root in the idea of intentional being helps explain some of the affinities we will shortly see between Spinoza’s treatment of the mind as idea of the body and more recent phenomenological treatments of bodily awareness. But first let us see the implications Spinoza draws from the unity of substance thinking and substance extended for the issue—crucial to the ethical orientation of his metaphysics—of ideas of non-existent objects.

For Spinoza, although thought and matter are causally independent, as self-contained sequences of modes, they are also unified through the relation of idea to object. Because God can think infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, his understanding of everything that follows from his essence is not mediated through understanding any other of his attributes. As he puts it—in terminology that echoes older ideas of the active intellect—God forms the idea of all things that follow from his essence, not from the fact that he is the object of his own idea, but solely from the fact that he is a thinking thing (IIP5D). But, although each unfolding of modes under an attribute is causally independent of all the others, the uniqueness of substance demands a complete correspondence. There cannot then be an actually existing idea of a finite material mode for which there is no corresponding actually existing such mode. Spinoza’s God, unlike the God of Leibniz, does not have ideas of non-existent, merely possible individuals, from among which he might conceivably choose which will become real—even if he had a will to accomplish such a choice. The mind of Spinoza’s God is not a ‘realm of possible realities’. Every determinate idea has as its object an actually existing material durational thing. How then can Spinoza allow for ideas of non-existent individuals? His treatment of this problem at IIP8 has an importance that goes beyond allaying the counter-intuitive appearance of his version of the correspondence between the ‘order and connection’ of ideas and that of things. The status of ideas of bodies that no longer exist—of the minds of the dead—is crucial to the climax of the Ethics, his version in Part Five of the eternity of the mind.

Ideas of non-existent things do not exist in the determinate, durational way that the ideas of existent things do. Rather, they are ‘comprehended in God’s infinite idea’ in the way illustrated—though only, Spinoza stresses, inadequately—in the presence of the undrawn rectangles comprehended in a circle. Spinoza’s point here is elusive. To grasp what is going on, we must avoid thinking of a relation between a specific idea and its non-existent object. For Spinoza there can be no such idea. If the object does not actually exist, neither does the idea. We must think rather of the relation between God-under-the-attribute-of-thought—substance thinking—and the determinate modes of thought in which he can be expressed. Substance thinking can be regarded as comprehending or containing all the determinate modes in which it will become determinate, as a circle can be said to contain all the triangles that can be constructed out of the segments of all the straight lines intersecting in it. But to say
that the circle ‘contains’ the rectangles is not to say that they are all there, sketched within its circumference.

We now see the rationale of Spinoza’s distinctive addition to the more common definition of essence as that without which a thing cannot be conceived—his insistence that essence is also that which, being given, gives also the thing. Spinoza spells the point out in the demonstration to IIP10: no finite thing can be conceived without substance, of which it is a mode. But God is not part of the essence of finite modes. Otherwise they would all have the necessary existence of substance. The being of each determinate idea is mediated through that of other determinate ideas. Without that mediation, there is no determinate idea to consider. The ideas of non-existent objects are not in Spinoza’s God in the way that Leibniz’s ideas of non-existent possibles can be said to be in his God. For Spinoza there are no determinate ideas of non-existent things anywhere. They do not have a shadowy existence as thoughts in the mind of a thinking God, any more than non-existent rectangles need be shadowy geometrical entities lightly sketched in the circle. To say that ‘they’ exist in God is just to say that ‘substance thinking’ exists. There are no specific ideas which Spinoza’s God might contemplate—no individual mental items that might exist in the lack of a corresponding material individual. Where we have specific existence—the determinacy of finite individual things, which for Spinoza amounts to duration—there we have a concrete, ‘certain and determinate way’ in which God’s essence is expressed (IIP10C and D). And to that determinacy of finite individual things demands the insertion of the individual in a chain of actually existing determinate causes (IIP9). This insertion of the mind, as finite idea, into the totality of other finite modes of thought has dramatic consequences for how the mind must now think of the awareness of body which constitutes it.

The text now returns to the other axis—the individual mind’s relation to the body which is its object. The mind, as an actually existing, durational mode of thought, is the idea of an actually existing, durational body. But in the case of both minds and bodies this finite being must be mediated through the being of other finite modes. Even the mind’s apparently immediate self-awareness is in fact mediated through the ideas of other finite modes whose causal force mediates the existence of its body. In a move which Spinoza acknowledges will bring his readers to an uncomprehending halt (IIP11S), he withdraws from the human mind the status of self-contained intellectual substance which it had for Descartes, and reshapes it as an idea in the infinite intellect of God. When we say that the mind perceives something, we are really saying that God has that idea. If the idea is adequate, God has it ‘insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind’. If it is inadequate, God has it ‘insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind’ (IIP11C).

Some commentators take Spinoza’s relation between ideas and their objects to be ‘logical’ rather than ‘psychological’. Thus Edwin Curley, in *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, suggests that the body can be taken as a set of facts, the mind as a set of propositions describing those facts (Curley 1969:119-43). On that interpretation, the inclusion of the individual mind in the infinite intellect of God becomes the uncontentious—but relatively uninteresting—claim that propositions about the human body are included in the totality of propositions about the world. But this fails to capture the way the Spinozistic mind takes body as its object—what
we might now call the ‘intentionality’ of the mind. And it also fails to capture Spinoza’s distinctive emphasis on the continuities between the understanding of ‘facts’, through reason, and the sensuousness of the lower forms of knowledge. In contrast to the external nature of the relation between propositions and facts, the relations between a Spinozistic mind and its body are imbued with the sense of a direct bodily awareness. This is one of the things that makes Spinoza’s philosophy—despite its affirmation of the sameness of mind and body—very different from later materialist theories of the mind. Spinoza’s version of the identity of the mind reduces neither mind to body nor body to mind; and the apprehension of body from a first-person perspective is just as important to it as scientific facts grasped from a third-person perspective. Indeed Spinoza seems to see the scientific knowledge of body through reason as developing out of, rather than radically opposed to, the direct awareness of body through sense and imagination. This non-reductivist version of the identity of mind and body has some affinities with more recent phenomenological philosophies of body centred on the concept of intentionality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, talks of a perspectival form of bodily awareness in which the body as object is not sharply separated out from the self that knows. There are echoes of Spinoza in his talk, in The Phenomenology of Perception, of a kind of knowledge, ‘underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body’, which we have by virtue of the fact that body is always with us and of the fact that ‘we are our body. ’ ‘[P]erceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962:206). Later, in the final chapter of The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty develops further this theme of a unity of being and of knowing, centred on taking seriously the embodiment of the knower. The concept of ‘flesh’ which he articulates there involves a unity of being which is meant to undercut the opposition between mental and physical, between knowing subject and known object (Merleau-Ponty 1968:130-55).

Spinoza’s version of ideas encompasses both the ‘logical’ notion of propositions and the ‘psychological’ state of bodily awareness, although ideas are of varying degrees of adequacy. If we insist on an exclusively ‘logical’ or ‘psychological’ rendering of the key concept of idea, we lose the continuity between Spinoza’s vertical axis—

relating individual ideas to the totality of modes of thinking substance—and the horizontal axis, relating ideas to their corresponding objects under the attribute of extension. Spinoza’s capacity to move so readily between what we now see as two distinct versions of ‘ideas’ helps explain why it should seem to him plausible to claim that there are in the individual mind ideas of everything that happens in the body of which it is the idea (IIP12). Spinoza’s treatment of bodies, and hence of minds, moves between a detached factual account of physical forces—as in the digression on the nature of bodies between Propositions 13 and 14—and what we would now see as phenomenological description of bodily awareness from a first-person perspective.

Minds are inserted into the totality, sharing the limited perspective of the particular material modes of which they are ideas. This makes our awareness of our bodies something very different from a detached, factual understanding of clearly circumscribed material entities.
becomes, rather, a confused awareness of other bodies grasped together with our own.

Spinoza’s account of how minds move from this confused bodily awareness to the higher forms of knowledge yields, as we shall see, a distinctive way of thinking of the relations between imagination and reason. This gives rise to one of the most controversial divides in Spinoza interpretation: how does he see the relations between the world, as grasped through imagination, and the world, as grasped through the common notions of reason? Is the world of finite individuals—the world of time, of contingencies and the passions they engender—an illusion, to be transcended in the higher forms of knowledge? Is the ‘real’ world a world of necessities grasped through reason in which individuality is left behind? Or does Spinoza take more seriously the world as it is delivered to imagination?

Hegel, in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, presented Spinoza as casting individuals into the abyss of all-encompassing oneness, so that what is is ‘God, and God alone’ (Hegel 1840:281). The tendency to take Spinoza’s monism as a rejection of individuality is strong also in more recent commentary. Roger Scruton, in his introductory study, Spinoza, argues that for Spinoza true perception demands that we rise above the illusory perspective of inadequate ideas to ‘the absolute viewpoint which is God’s’ (Scruton 1986:73).

On Scruton’s interpretation, not only is individuality unreal; there is a real sense in which, in Spinoza’s world, nothing really happens. Time is an inadequate guide to ultimate reality; happening, change and process belong only in the partial and confused perception of inadequate ideas. To judge the adequacy of this common view of the upshot of Spinoza’s philosophy we must now turn to his treatment of the imagination.

Ways of knowing

The relations between imagination and reason are crucial in Spinoza’s system. The body, which is the object of the human mind, is capable of acting and being acted on in many ways at once. This complexity of the human body makes possible both the confusions of the imagination and the higher forms of knowledge. Spinoza’s treatment of individuality is grounded in his brief remarks on the physics of bodies between Propositions 13 and 14 of Part Two; and so too is his treatment of imagination. Bodies communicate motion to each other; and their synchronisation—the union of bodies—is what makes an individual. The simplest bodies are distinguished from one another by ‘motion and rest, speed and slowness’. These simple bodies come together as synchronised centres of the communication of motion—reaching, through a hierarchy of such composite individuals, up to the ‘whole of nature’, conceived as one individual whose parts vary in infinite ways without any change of the whole individual. The human body is thus a composite individual, a union of parts acting as a centre of communicating and communicated motion. Each individual body exerts a causal force on others; and each is in turn constantly impinged on by others. Each needs for its preservation ‘a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated’ (IIL7S).

An important subclass of these communications of motion between bodies is sensation—explained by Spinoza as changes of the surface of the body by the impingement of other bodies. Ideas of the modifications of our bodies, he stresses, involve both the nature of the
human body and, at the same time, the nature of the external body (IIP16). So our minds perceive the nature of a great many bodies together with the nature of our own. As he has already pointed out in his diagnosis of the illusions of popular ideas of God, in the appendix to Part One, the ideas we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies. What now emerges is the temporal dimensions of our perceiving things together. As long as the human body is affected, the mind will have the idea of an actually existing external body. Our bodies retain traces of the changes brought about on their surfaces by the impinging of other bodies. So the mind will again regard external bodies as present, even when they no longer exist (IIP17D and C). Paul’s mind will continue to regard Peter as present to it—even after Peter’s death, when the idea of Peter which constitutes Peter’s own mind no longer exists. These affections of the body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us are Spinoza’s version of ‘images’; and the mind’s regarding bodies in this way is his version of imagining. These imaginings are not of themselves a source of error. Error arises from the fact that they can occur unaccompanied by other ideas which ‘exclude from existence’ the non-existent things imagined as present.

On this co-presence of things to mind, arising from the structural complexity of the human body, rests the world delivered to us by imagination and memory—the world of ordinary consciousness. Memory Spinoza defines as the connection of ideas involving the nature of things outside the human body—‘a connection that is in the Mind according to the order and connection of the affections of the human Body’ (IIP18S). The contrasts between this ‘order and connection’ and that of ideas according to reason is the nub of the controversial issues of interpretation surrounding Spinoza’s treatment of the world of ordinary consciousness and the ‘fictions’ on which it rests. It is clear that Spinoza regards the connection of images through the affections of individual human bodies as an inferior mode of thought. The affections of individual bodies lay down widely divergent associational paths. From traces of a horse seen in the sand, the soldier passes to thought of horsemen and war, the farmer to ploughs and fields. The sequence of ideas in consciousness is not an adequate guide to the natures of things outside the body; and this inadequacy makes Spinoza distrustful of words as a vehicle of thought. The meanings of words rest on associations between bodily affections—between sounds and perceptions. Much of what is avoidable in the mind’s confusion, we will see later, arises from mistaking the images and the words associated with them for ideas. But, although Spinoza’s talk of the confusions of imagination is in keeping with the rationalist theory of knowledge, there is a great deal more to his treatment of imagination—and of the world of the ‘common order of Nature’ (IIP29C) which it delivers to us—than an affirmation of the superiority of reason.

The mind’s status as idea of the body means that it has an inherent lack of self-knowledge. Since it does not know ‘the human body itself, but only the body as it is presented together with other bodies, the mind does not know itself either, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body (IIP29C). Imagination is not a source of adequate knowledge of bodies. We do not know our own bodies; for they are objects to our minds only together with
other bodies. Nor do we know other bodies; for they are objects to our mind only together with our own. Ideas of affections of bodies are confused ideas—‘like conclusions without premises’ (IIP28D). So long as it perceives ‘from the common order of Nature’, the mind has only ‘a confused and mutilated knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies’ (IIP29C). But there is for Spinoza a different and higher kind of knowledge which escapes this mutilation. It too involves a perceiving of things ‘together’, but in a different way. When it perceives ‘from the common order of Nature’, the mind is ‘determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that’. When it knows according to reason, in contrast, the mind is ‘determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions’ (IIP29S).

Both ways of knowing are grounded in the complex structure of the human body—in the fluidity which allows it to be affected by other bodies and to retain the traces of their impingement. The first kind of knowledge is associated with the duration of bodies, which depends on ‘the common order of Nature and the constitution of things’ (IIP30D). Our knowledge of the duration of things cannot but be inadequate, for adequate knowledge would involving our under-

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standing a succession of determinations reaching to infinity. From Spinoza’s claims about contingency and corruptibility in Part One (IP29 and IP33S1) it follows that all particular things—which cannot be adequately known—are contingent and corruptible. For Spinoza that is what contingency is. He stresses the mind’s capacity, as idea of a complex body, to have—simultaneously with ideas of what is currently happening in the body—ideas also of much that has previously happened. This bodily capacity to retain traces is the source of the possibility of forming the ‘common notions’ of reason. But it is also the source of the errors of the imagination, when we mistake for something presently real an idea arising from the conglomerate of past perceptions. The errors of the imagination and the truths grasped through reason have their origins in the same facts of complexity of bodily structure. Because knowledge of the ‘order of causes’ is hidden from us, what is before us can never seem to us either necessary or impossible. ‘So we call it contingent or possible’ (IIP33S1). Apart from our lack of knowledge, there is no contingency.

There are two ways of taking all this. On the first, Spinoza is saying that duration and the singular things that have it are illusions produced by the defective, inferior knowledge associated with imagination. On the second, duration and singularity are not illusory but real; they are constituted through operations of the imagination that can be criticised but never entirely transcended. The first is the interpretation made popular by Hegel—the view of Spinoza as the philosopher of the abyss. The ‘real’ world on this view is the world as it is perceived by reason, transcending the illusions of imagination—a world without individuality, without time, without confusion. The ideal is a rational grasp of the world, approximating to ‘the absolute viewpoint which is God’s’ in Scruton’s phrase. This is a common view of Spinoza’s treatment of the relations between reason and imagination. Spinoza emerges as a strongly committed rationalist. The illusions fostered by imagination in individual minds, and in the social world, give way to the supremacy of reason.

This view of Spinoza’s version of reason’s superiority to imagination is often accompanied by a complementary view of his attitude to emotion. Isaac Bashevis Singer gives literary expression to this supposedly Spinozistic repudiation of emotion in his story, ‘The
Spinoza of Market Street’. The ageing reclusive Dr Nathun Fischelon, modelled on Spinoza’s own reputation as a recluse, has devoted his life to writing a commentary on the *Ethics*. His health failing, his finances dwindling, his fragile structures of sociability crumbling at the onset of the Great War, Fischelon—to the sardonic amusement of his neighbours—succumbs to the attentions of an elderly spinster neighbour, equally poignant in her disappointed expectations and her solitariness. Fischelon’s pursuit of Spinozistic perfection of mind, his attempts to integrate the propositions of the *Ethics* into his apparently colourless and impoverished life, his scorn for ‘the pleasures of the moment’, are presented as a pathetic enactment of the principles of Spinoza’s philosophy. But Singer’s brilliant prose captures also the fragments of sensuous beauty that surround Fischelon, in the midst of his attempted detachment. We see the squares of sunlight shimmering on the faded walls of the sick man’s room with the evocative sense of transience captured in Dutch interior paintings of Spinoza’s period. Singer’s story can be read as a satire on the pretensions of the Spinozistic ideal of detachment. But it also admits of a subtler reading of the implications of the philosophy to which its protagonist has dedicated his life. At the end of the story, Fischelon, waking to a conviction of his folly after the ‘miraculous’ awakening of ‘powers long dormant’ in the intoxicated pleasure of his wedding night, is left at the end of the story, in a state of wonderstruck perception of the beauty of Market Street, asleep under the flickering gas lamps and the stars.

In the higher sphere, apparently, little notice was taken of the fact that a certain Dr Fischelon had in his declining days married someone called Black Dobbe. Seen from above even the Great War was nothing but a temporary play of the modes.

(Singer 1981:25)

From the perspective ‘from above’, which Fishelon attains at the end of the story, his closing murmur, as he breathes deeply of the midnight air—‘Divine Spinoza, forgive me. I have become a fool’—takes on an irony and an ambiguity which can be seen as true to the spirit of the *Ethics*. Is it his lapse into the ‘pleasures of the moment’ or his former illusion that, ‘seen from above’, that lapse matters, that we are supposed to see as the folly for which he asks Spinoza’s forgiveness? It is possible to read this ironic tale as satirising a life led in accordance with Spinoza’s philosophy. It is also possible to read it as a progress to a richer understanding of that philosophy—as the story of a movement from a self-centred preoccupation with the pursuit of a sterile version of reason to a richer appreciation of what is really involved in perceiving the world and its transitory pleasures *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The first interpretation of Spinoza’s rationalism—as a transcending of imagination and emotion—does seem to be suggested by some of the passages we have looked at in Parts One and Two, which present time and contingency as products of a defective form of knowledge. But what then are we to make of Spinoza’s claim that singular bodies cannot be adequately perceived? And, more importantly, what are we to make of the claim that the human mind cannot know even itself adequately? If we were ever to achieve the rationalist goal of adequate knowledge, would it be at the cost of our very existence as individual minds? It may
seem obvious that Spinoza is urging us to transcend the illusions of the imagination in order to see the world adequately through reason. But we need to remember here the implications of Spinoza’s treatment of the individual mind as the idea of a body inserted into the totality of determinate modes of extension. If duration and singularity are illusions, the illusion extends to the existence of the finite singular minds which we ourselves are. If it is all illusion, that applies also to us, whose defective knowledge supposedly produces the illusions. Not only is this high-minded goal of adequate knowledge inevitably too difficult for us to attain. Reaching it would, it seems, have to be at the cost of forfeiting our own existence.

There is no denying the rationalism in Spinoza’s subordination of imagination to the critical powers of reason. But his treatment of imagination and its ‘fictions’ is double-edged. Even if we do accept the traditional interpretation of him as a committed rationalist, we can see a distinctive role emerging here for the imagination as a powerful ally of reason. Christopher Norris, in *Spinoza and the Origins of Critical Theory*, emphasises this aspect of Spinoza’s treatment of the imagination. Central to Norris’s reading is the rationalist commitment to the supremacy of the critical powers of reason over illusions—both in individual minds and in the social world—fostered by imagination. Norris’s Spinoza shows us how to distinguish imaginary or confused ideas from adequate or true ones. Spinoza, he thinks, makes a lasting contribution to the Enlightenment project of the rational critique of illusion through his distinctive approach to the status of ‘fictions’—the activity of ‘feigning’.

Norris stresses the importance of Spinoza’s earlier work *The Emendation of the Intellect*, where Spinoza offers an account of fictions as a way of knowing which is half way, as it were, between truth and falsehood. Fictitious or ‘feigned’ ideas are mixed methods of knowing. They partake of imagining; but, through being criticised by reason, they become a source of improved understanding. Fictions involve untruths that are knowingly entertained rather than mistaken for adequate ideas; they are not assigned to some separate realm of non-cognitive values. Although they do not themselves yield adequate knowledge, they rework the materials of common perception—the forms under which experience presents itself to a mind initially held captive by inadequate knowledge. So fictions give access to adequate ideas without being themselves adequate. Although partial or mutilated, they have their own distinctive role to play in the process of arriving at adequate knowledge. As products of the imagination, fictions are subordinate to the higher powers of reason. Fictitious ideas are not true; but they are expressions of a positive mental capacity: the capacity to feign. That capacity is an expression of our lack of complete knowledge; an omniscient being would be unable to feign. But feigning is nonetheless a capacity with its own strengths. We can feign only those things whose necessity or impossibility is unknown to us. We cannot feign either what we know to be true or what we know to be untrue. We can feign only because we are ignorant; but feigning is a positive response to our limitations as knowers. The less the mind understands, the greater is the power of feigning. The less we know nature, Spinoza observes, the more easily we can feign many things, such as that trees speak, that men are changed in a moment into stones and springs, that nothing becomes something, that even gods are changed into beasts and men. 

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Feigning is a cognitive activity; but it belongs to the imagination rather than the intellect. Spinoza’s rationalism, on Norris’s reading, demands a firm distinction between the two. Reason remains the arbiter of the truth or falsehood of fictitious ideas, retaining a vantage point from which it is able to subject them to a more rigorous and undeceiving order of representation. Fictions offer a surrogate knowledge, inherently improvable through the critical reflections of reason. The distinction between truth and error is fundamental; fictions are different from the clear ideas of reason. But, in this border zone between error and truth, inadequate ideas can be reworked into better, more truthful representations—even if not all thinkers can individually make the full transition into the light of reason.

Norris’s interpretation retains the rationalist commitment to the supremacy of reason, while emphasising a distinctive complementary role for imagination. In this respect, the interpretation remains within the scope of our first approach to Spinoza’s rationalism, although it offers a much more positive view of the imagination than is usual for that approach. There is another, more radical way of taking Spinoza’s treatment of the relations between imagination and reason, which has found cogent articulation in the work of the Italian commentator, Antonio Negri. In The Savage Anomaly, Negri presents Spinoza as revaluing the imagination. Imagination gives us access to the realities of the social world. Its fictions might not reveal the ultimate nature of our thought or of anything else. But reflection on them can show us how the real social world of ordinary experience is constructed. The imagination has a constitutive role in the contingent forms of the social world. Negri’s reading brings out the ambivalence of Spinoza’s attitude to reason and imagination. Here rationalism passes over into something new: a revaluation of the mind’s capacity to attend confusedly to things retained in memory along with what is now before it. Imagination and reason remain distinct and reason remains superior. But if we try to think through the implications of Spinoza’s treatment of imagination, its relations with reason become less stable than Norris’s presentation suggests.

On Norris’s picture, reason is sharply separated from imagination—a superior activity of the mind, which controls the vagaries of the imagination so that ideas come adequately to represent the true natures of things. Fictions occupy a border zone between the two, facilitating reason’s engagement with, and transformation of, inadequate ideas. The desired outcome is to leave the imagination behind, moving into the clear light of reason. On Negri’s picture, in contrast, Spinoza’s philosophy puts into play ‘the human totality: from sensation to reason, from sense to imagination to idea’ (Negri 1981:36). Reason comes into a less stable relation with the imagination, drawing from it a new ‘savage power’. The imagination, on this way of looking at it, ceases to be just an inferior faculty which must be transcended if we are to see the world truly. Imagination can play a constitutive role, rather than just a distorting one; in understanding its fictions, reason reflects on the real social world in all its confusion and contradictoriness. No longer an inferior, distracting source of illusion which must be set aside, imagination delivers the appropriate objects of rational reflection. Here imagination shifts over from the knowing subject to the world as object of knowledge. Rather than being a distorting intruder which must be left out of the business of knowledge, its constructions now become a proper object of rational understanding.
To accept Negri’s reading is to see Spinoza as recognising a creative role of the imagination in the constitution of reality. It is an idea which Hume takes further, making imagination the creative force in knowledge, and the passions the basis of sociability and morals, while reason is left inert and powerless. But it is a shift that we can see as starting in the robust version of imagination offered in Spinoza’s version of rationalism. While acknowledging the limitations of imagination as a source of knowledge, Spinoza has a healthy respect for the ‘savage power’ it lends to reason. Imagination becomes something more than a source of error, to be transcended. Its fictions are constitutive of the world of ordinary experience. Reason can criticise those fictions, replacing them with better ones. The goal is not to transcend and spurn imagination but to complement it and collaborate with it. We should not be surprised then that in Part Three, as Negri says, Spinoza’s material for analysis should be ‘the very world of delirium or the most fantastic or crazy dimension of opinion’ (Negri 1981:36). Rational investigation now traverses the totality of the world, ‘pressing toward both the great outside of adventure and discovery and the sublime inside of consciousness’ (Negri 1981:36). The world of passions and imagination comes into view as fitting object for rational investigation. ‘Reason traverses the imagination, liberating the truth it contains, and meanwhile the imagination constructs the passivity of the existent and, therefore, of reason itself (Negri 1981:106).

Negri’s interpretation of the relations between Spinozistic reason and imagination captures something important—that for Spinoza the power of imagination is both constructive and destructive. This dual aspect of imagination is strikingly evoked in a letter written by Spinoza to his friend Pieter Balling on the topic of omens. Balling had recounted a strange experience in which he heard—while his child was still healthy and strong—groans like those the child later uttered while dying. The groans, Spinoza responds, are the effects of the father’s imagination, as is shown by the fact that when he got up to listen—when his rational mind was directly attending to the phenomenon—they were less vivid. But Spinoza thinks that these effects of the anxious father’s imagination under the influence of emotion are not mere ‘distortions’. They are indeed omens, through which the father ‘sees’ the impending disaster. Spinoza contrasts his friend’s case with an unnerving experience of his own in which the horrors of a dream persist into waking life—especially the image of ‘a certain black and leprous Brazilian’ whom he had never seen before. The image disappears when he attends to something else—when, for example, he casts his eyes on a book. But it comes back with the same vividness when his attention is not fixed on any particular object, until the head gradually vanishes. (It is not clear from the text whether the complete image loses its head or whether it was, all along, only the head that appeared. )

In Spinoza’s discussion of these strange phenomena the imagination comes into much closer relations with reason than we might expect from the conventional understanding of seventeenth-century rationalism. Reason, imagination and emotion draw together in Spinoza’s diagnosis of what makes his friend’s experience—unlike his own unnerving image—an omen. The father loves his child so much that he and the child are ‘as it were one and the same’. The father, he says, participates ideally in the consequences of the child’s
essence. These passages show how close for Spinoza is the interweaving of the illusory effects of the imagination and its positive force. The two aspects of imagination—as illusion fostered by the materiality of the body and as positive insight into truth—come together here.

The contingency of associations of bodily traces plays a role in these oddities of mental life. That part of the story coexists with a stress on the mind’s grasp of essences, taking us into the realm of the highest exercise of the mind. Yet the anxious father gains his insight into the future not through the exercise of deductive reason, but through an emotional identification which allows him to participate in his child’s essence. The sense of the ominous here is not an aberration produced by a diseased body. Imagination, intellect and emotion work together to yield an insight into the future which is not occult; nor is it a calm, clear and distinct perception. The experience is a troubling, unwanted, fearful intimation of the truth. The groans, like the appearance of the Brazilian, are ghostly appearances. But there is nothing mysterious in Spinoza’s version of omens. He sees no inconsistency in allowing that a rational mind can believe in its ability to foresee the future. There is no denigration of objective truth here. Nor is there any suspension of the laws of reason. In special circumstances, a future death can be discerned in an essence even during health. Omens are possible because we live in an orderly world. But it is only through the coming together of imagination, emotion and reason that these reverberations of the future can erupt in present consciousness. Reason is not repudiated. But omens confront us with the ‘savage power’ that comes from its close connections with imagination.

Duration itself is caught up in Spinoza’s treatment of the relations between imagination and reason. Whether we are to think of it as an illusion—to be transcended in clear thought—or as part of the world, as it is constituted for us by imagination, hangs on how we think of those relations between the two ways of knowing. How we think of Spinoza’s treatment of truth and falsity is also at stake in our construal of the relations between the lower and higher ways of knowing. There is nothing absolute about error for Spinoza; it is just a privation of knowledge—an incompleteness, a fragmentation. Here again we see the double-edged character of Spinoza’s rationalism. There is, he tells us, nothing positive in virtue of which ideas are false; nothing real to which we can appeal to explain the difference between the false idea and the true; nothing determinate that we can root out; no contrasted marks of truth that we can cultivate.

For Spinoza the world, as we know it through imagination, offers a stubborn resistance, which undercut any facile sense of the power of reason to deliver a preferred vision of reality. We can have ‘only an entirely inadequate knowledge’ either of the duration of our bodies or of that of the singular things which are outside them (IIP30 and P31). We avoid error not by avoiding imaginings but by knowing their inadequacy. We begin to understand what error is, Spinoza tells us, by recognising that our imaginations, considered in themselves, contain no error. The mind errs, not in imagining, but only in lacking an idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to it.

For if the mind, while it imagined nonexistent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things did not exist, it would, of course, attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its nature, not to a vice—especially if this faculty of imagining depended only on its own nature, that is (by ID7), if the mind’s faculty of imagining were free.
But there is not really any possibility of such a ‘free’ imagining. Our imaginings are determined by the ‘common order of Nature’ (IIP29C and S). Anticipating the importance of this theme in later parts of the *Ethics*, Spinoza goes on to illustrate his theory of error with reference to the belief in free will (IIP35S). This belief, which for Spinoza epitomises error, consists in our being conscious of our actions while being ignorant of their causes.

We have already seen Spinoza’s elaboration of this example of error in his correspondence with Tschirnhaus. In another example, which recurs throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza talks of the experience of looking at the sun and imagining it as about two hundred feet away from us (IIP35S). This error, he says, does not consist in the imagining but in our having the image while being ignorant of its causes.

Imagining it as near can coexist with knowing its true distance. Later, in the opening sections of Part Four, Spinoza will draw from this example the core of his account of how we gain freedom from the bondage of illusion. What is important to see here in Part Two is that although Spinoza is, as a rationalist, committed to the power of reason to transcend error, this is not a matter of shedding imaginings. The imagination has a resilience which can coexist with the knowledge of its inadequacy.

What then is it for a mind to perceive adequately? Spinoza has claimed that the duration of singular things cannot be the object of adequate knowledge. He now claims that, whereas singular things can be known only inadequately, what is common to all things can be known only adequately. Being ‘equally in the part and in the whole’ they are not subject to the fragmentation which affects our knowledge of duration; what things have in common can be perceived only adequately (IIP38). It follows that the more our bodies have in common with other things, the more capable the mind is of adequate knowledge (IIP39C). But the ‘common notions’ of reason—the vehicle of adequate knowledge—must be distinguished, Spinoza insists, from a different kind of ‘universal’—the confused notions which result when the mind cannot keep its images distinct from one another and which are formed differently according to the dispositions of individual bodies (IIP40S1). Knowledge through the true common notions of reason must be distinguished, both from mutilated, confused ‘knowledge from random experience’ and from the knowledge we have through signs or words which rest on imagination. But there is another source of adequate knowledge which Spinoza also distinguishes from reason, and which will be crucial in the unfolding of the ethical ramifications of adequate knowledge—the kind of knowing he calls ‘intuitive’.

The first way of knowing is focused on singular things, but is inherently inadequate. The second is inherently adequate, but unable to grasp the essences of singular things. The third and highest kind of knowledge is inherently adequate and able to understand singular things. It proceeds, Spinoza says, from an adequate idea of the essence of attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things. Spinoza’s illustration through the different ways of knowing
the fourth proportional—by applying a rule by rote, by applying a rule with understanding and simply by seeing ‘in one glance’—gives us some grasp of the differences in the ways of knowing. The full significance of Spinoza’s version of intuitive knowledge—its connections with the eternity of the mind and the intellectual love of God—become fully explicit only in the final sections of the Ethics. But the groundwork for these momentous doctrines is already being prepared here in the concluding sections of Part One—in Spinoza’s treatment of certainty as consisting just in the awareness of true ideas, and in his rejection of all distinction between intellect and will.

No one who has a true idea, Spinoza insists, is unaware that a true idea involves the highest certainty. ‘For to have a true idea means nothing other than knowing a thing perfectly, or in the best way’ (IIP43S). His strategy for convincing his readers of this way of thinking of truth as ‘its own standard’ (IIP43S) is to bring to the surface the underlying model of judgment which makes it seem inevitable that there are marks or criteria of truth, guarantees of certainty—the view of an idea as ‘something mute, like a picture on a tablet’, rather than as an active mode of thinking. The obvious target of these passages is Descartes’s distinction between intellect and will. In the famous ‘method of doubt’ elaborated in the Meditations, Descartes treats ‘clearness and distinctness’ as the marks of truth. These marks are made familiar to the mind through its inability to doubt its own existence. Where it finds those criteria present, the mind should exercise its free will in assent; where it finds them lacking, it should withhold assent. The path to certainty thus rests on an account of judgment as involving the conjunction of a passive, and limited, capacity for understanding with an active, and unlimited, faculty of will. In the fourth Meditation, Descartes presents error as arising because the scope of the will is wider than that of the understanding. Avoiding error involves bringing understanding and will into alignment, so that we exercise our will in judging only where the mind is assured of clarity in understanding. Error, like morally bad action, results from a misuse of our free will.

The state Descartes presents as a righteous exercise of the will in suspending judgment, Spinoza sees as a confusion. It is produced, he thinks, by a misleading model of ideas as passive, mute ‘pictures

on a panel’ rather than active affirmations or negations. His attempts in these passages to redescribe the suspension of judgment without any reference to the will may seem dogmatic. Suspension of judgment, Spinoza insists, is not an exercise of a faculty of will, but a perception: when we say that someone suspends judgment, we are saying nothing but that he sees that he does not perceive the thing adequately’ (IIP49SIIB(ii)). It may seem that we can have the idea of a winged horse without affirming it. But what is it to perceive a winged horse other than to affirm the wings of the horse? And that is what we do when we have the idea in the lack of other ideas which would ‘exclude it from existence’. Spinoza has his imaginary Cartesian opponent respond that, surely, we can have the idea of the winged horse without falling into error. But even here, Spinoza insists, there is in fact no unaffirmed idea. What we have is rather a different affirmation—of inadequacy.

This concern with the correct description of suspension of judgment may seem trivial. But much hangs for Spinoza on being able to articulate an account of judgment which does not appeal to the alleged freedom of the will. The differences between Descartes and Spinoza are radical. Where Descartes sees error as the product of free will, Spinoza, as we have seen,
presents the belief in free will as a paradigm illustration of his account of error as fragmentation. The dispute about the right description of the boy imagining the winged horse re-enacts in a new context some of the oldest concerns of philosophy, echoing the ancient differences among Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics about how best to attain tranquillity. Spinoza’s arguments against the Cartesians hark back to those ancient concerns with the ethical significance of the search for truth, as well as pointing forward to more modern concerns with the certainty of scientific knowledge and the possibility of an ‘ethics of belief’. Spinoza alerts us to the ethical significance of his account of judgment without the will at IIP49SIVA. This doctrine gives, he says, complete peace of mind, teaching us that our greatest happiness consists in the knowledge of God alone, which is the greatest freedom.

Part Two thus ends, as does Part One, with an affirmation of acquiescence in the necessities that govern all things, the human mind included. Reason of its nature regards things as necessary; that is a

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consequence of its being inherently adequate knowledge. Since the appearance of contingency is the result of inadequate knowledge, there is no room for contingency in the world as perceived by the higher ways of knowing. The appearance of contingency arises from a vacillation of the imagination. Time itself belongs with the imagination. It is the nature of reason to regard things as necessary and to perceive them ‘under a certain species of eternity’ (IIP44C2).

How do the three ways of knowing relate to one another? We may see them as replacing one another in an ascending hierarchy, like Plato’s ascent from the world of appearance to the world of the forms. Alternatively, we may see them—in my view, more fruitfully—as coexisting in a unified perception of the world. But we cannot see the higher kinds of knowledge as giving us superior knowledge of the very same things accessible to the lower. Imagination and reason have, as we have seen, different kinds of object: singular things, in the case of imagination; what is ‘common to all’, in the case of reason. Nor do reason and intuitive knowledge always have the same kind of objects. For reason has no access to singularity, whereas intuitive knowledge can understand the essences of singular things in relation to God’s essence. This might seem to make the highest kind of knowledge elusive—something to be attained through an intellectual struggle to draw the mind away from the world of appearance. But that is too Platonic a reading of Spinoza. God’s ‘infinite essence and his eternity’, he insists, are in fact ‘known to all’ (IIP47S). But, in the grip of imagination, we do not recognise it for what it is—mistakenly thinking that the knowledge of God must come out of something very different from the actual existence of modifications of our bodies. Where the Platonic ascent leaves bodily awareness behind, Spinoza’s transitions between the three ways of knowing keep the awareness of bodily modification firmly in view as the locus of understanding things as eternal. The objects of the highest kind of knowledge are as manifest to us as our awareness of our own existence as ideas of body. The full recognition of what is directly before us—and the freedom that recognition will bring—is, in the resounding words of the final sentence of the Ethics, as difficult as it is rare. But when we reflect on those bodily modifications—on our ‘imaginings’—we are already on that path to freedom.

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Chapter 3
From bondage to freedom
The emotions

In Part Three, Spinoza brings the operations of the imagination together with the operations of the passions in a powerful account of the human world within which the life of freedom and virtue must be pursued. Initially, it may seem a bleak picture. Spinoza’s descriptions of the human species are uncompromising. Human beings are inherently self-seeking and envious; and their collective social life is inherently conflict-ridden. Ideals of morality are recast in terms of a pursuit of self-preservation. But there is in this unrelenting realism also an exhilaration. Despite the darkness of much of its content, the mood of the writing anticipates a delight in the freedom which will come from the struggle to understand the passions.

Spinoza prides himself on an innovative application to the passions of the same challenging scrutiny that his peers extend to mathematical objects. He will, he declares in the Preface, treat human passion in the geometrical style, just as if it were an investigation of ‘lines, planes and Bodies’. From the fact that passions are ‘contrary to reason’ it in no way follows that they are unworthy objects of rational investigation—strange though this exercise may seem to those who see human beings as disturbing, rather than following, the order of nature. The laws according to which things happen and change are ‘always and everywhere the same’. Our passions then cannot be seen as flaws or aberrations from nature. Affects of hate, anger, envy follow with the same ‘necessity and force of nature’ as anything else; and the contemplation of these necessities will be no less a source of pleasure to the mind.

Later, in Parts Four and Five, we will see the transformative power of this pleasure. In understanding the passions we do not merely exercise an enjoyable intellectual power which leaves the passions themselves unchanged. This understanding transforms the passions into active, rational emotions—the source of freedom and virtue. The upshot of Spinoza’s ‘geometrical’ treatment of the passions is in fact quite different from what we might at first expect from his analogy with lines and planes. His systematic scrutiny of the passions does not distance them as neutral objects of an unemotional intellect. What emerges is a form of reason very different from what we might associate with geometry—a reason which is itself affective.

The opening definitions and postulates link Spinoza’s treatment of the passions with the preceding treatment of the imagination, highlighting a new aspect of the body’s capacity to undergo many changes and retain images from those changes. Affects, for Spinoza, are a subclass of bodily ‘affections’. Unlike other ‘affections’, the affects involve increases or decreases in the body’s power of acting. It is the relations between those affections which are corporeal traces or images and those which are affects—increasing or decreasing the body’s power of acting—that set the framework for Spinoza’s treatment of emotions. Gilles Deleuze, in Spinoza: A Practical Philosophy, stresses the importance of this difference between ‘affection’ (affectio) and ‘affect’ (affectus). Affectio is a state of the affected body, implying
the presence of an affecting one. *Affectus* refers to the passage from one state to another in the affected body—the increase or decrease in its power of acting. Affections are associated with images, affects

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with feelings (Deleuze 1970:49). Affects can be either active or passive. This distinction links the concerns of Part Three with the preceding discussion in Part Two of the distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas. Inadequate ideas involve the mind’s passivity—‘undergoing’; adequate ideas involve its activity—‘doing’. The more the mind has inadequate ideas, the more it is liable to passions; the more it has adequate ideas, the more it is active (IIIP1 and C). To understand the passions is to understand the passivities that result from the human body’s insertion in the order of nature, which makes it constantly affected by the impingements of other bodily modes. In this exercise, Spinoza’s focus—in keeping with his repudiation of mind-body interaction and all notion of a free will exerted on body—is firmly on bodily determination. His concern is with what the body can do—with the rich and complex context of images and recollection, which make bodily determination more than just a matter of immediate modifications under the impact of present affections.

In linking his treatment of the passions to the mental passivity of inadequate ideas, Spinoza is reworking ancient Stoic preoccupations with the connections between passion and irrationality. Passions implicate the mind in negation, reflecting our position as ‘a part of Nature which cannot be perceived clearly and distinctly through itself, without the others’ (IIIP3S). His discussion also echoes Stoic concern with the striving for self-preservation. There is in Spinoza’s account an inevitability about our being subject to the passions. Ultimately, we can neither avoid them nor escape from them; and this gives a different tone both to his view of the passions and to his version of reason’s remedy of them. Like the Stoics, he allows for the existence of rational affects; and, like them, he argues for a strong connection between virtue and understanding. But his account of the transformation of the passions themselves, through understanding, into active rational affects has no clear ancient predecessors. He takes from the Stoics the conviction that the understanding and acceptance of necessities is the path to freedom and virtue. But for him the passions—rather than being irrational judgments which are supposed to give way to acquiescence in necessity once the truth is grasped—are themselves the subject matter for the transformative power of understanding.

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Spinoza’s explanations of action, as adequate causality—understandable through our own nature—and of passivity, as ‘partial’ causality (IIID2), are complemented by the claim at IIIP4 that ‘no thing can be destroyed except through an external cause.’ This brings us to the core of Spinoza’s crucial concept of *conatus*—the striving or endeavour to persist in being, which he equates with the actual essence of a thing. The identification may well seem paradoxical. The idea of a singular thing appears to loop back on itself. The thing’s essence, rather than being what it strives to preserve in order to avoid ceasing to exist, is seen as consisting in that very striving. But we need to remember here that for Spinoza the being of a singular thing consists in its being a determinate mode of the power of substance, mediating that power and itself mediated by other modes. For such a thing to ‘persist in being’ is precisely for it to have effects on other things—to exert power, whether adequately or ‘partially’, within the totality of modes under an attribute. This striving, when related to mind,
is for Spinoza the true nature of what we call the will, wrongly construed as a free cause. When the striving is related to mind and body together, it is called ‘appetite’. One of the most controversial aspects of the Ethics is Spinoza’s identification of appetite, in this sense, as ‘the very essence of man’. Human beings are seen as determined to do the things that promote their own preservation. On this basis, Spinoza constructs his version of ethics as the pursuit of self-preservation. Our ideas of the good are constructed out of our actual strivings and appetites. Rather than striving for things because we judge them to be good, ‘we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it’ (IIIP9S).²

Does this make Spinoza’s moral philosophy a version of egoism? Jonathan Bennett takes it as obvious that Spinoza affirms a doctrine of egoism and castigates him—both for the doctrine itself and for thinking that he achieves a reconciliation, later in Part Four, between egoism and collaborative morality (Bennett 1984:299-307). Commenting on Propositions 4-6 of Part Three, Bennett suggests that, from the premise that nothing can destroy itself without outside help, Spinoza invalidly infers that each thing tries as hard as it can to stay in existence. Spinoza, he goes on to claim, has illegitimately helped himself to a teleological doctrine of self-preservation, inferring facts about how human beings in fact behave from facts about the results of their conduct. On the basis of a badly argued self-preservation doctrine, Bennett alleges, Spinoza tries to convince us that all motivation must be fundamentally egoistic.

On Bennett’s reading, Spinoza’s ethic centres on the individual self: ‘the key concept is that of an individual which is like another individual: my fellow man appears in the form of an individual with the same nature as myself (Bennett 1984:299). What Spinoza relies on to bridge the gap between self-seeking and seeking the good of others, according to Bennett, is the idea that, to the extent that things are qualitatively alike, what helps or harms one of them also helps or harms the others. Bennett finds this idea ‘remarkable’. Out of ‘utter egoism’, there is supposed to flow a ‘collaborative morality’, without any help from politics. Bennett argues that, despite the similarity in ‘natures’ between human beings, the same things may bear differently on their welfare; and that the similarities between human beings can contribute to conflict rather than collaboration. There is a deep incoherence then, he argues, in Spinoza’s moral vision.¹

Spinoza’s ensuing discussion throughout Part Three, however, shows that he is well aware of the inevitability of conflict between human beings. To present his attempted reconciliation between egoism and collaborative morality as based on ‘an indefensible doctrine of harmony through similarity’ is to miss the dynamic character of Spinoza’s striving for self-preservation. Bennett is too restrictive, both in his interpretation of what is involved in Spinoza’s equation of self-preservation and the actual existence of individuals, and in his presentation of Spinoza’s ethic as a version of egoism. If to preserve one’s being is necessarily to exert causal power on some modes, and also to be acted upon by others, the distinction between self and other becomes here something quite different from what we are accustomed to in models of incidental interaction between independently existing individuals. Rather than a reduction of supposedly altruistic behaviour to egoism, what we find in Spinoza is a reconceptualising of the relations between individuals. Spinoza’s point is not that an individual—identifiable independently of its relations with others—necessarily pursues its own interests rather than theirs. It is rather that what it is
to be an individual is to be both determined to act through the mediation of other modes and likewise to determine others.

The fluctuations between acting and being acted upon provide the spectrum along which each individual will experience its passions and their transformation in ethical life. But these fluctuations also of course form the basis of Spinoza’s treatment of the imagination. The mind’s imaging of things as present, and its affirming of the body’s existence, provide the parameters within which he describes the interconnections of affections and affects. These interconnections give rise to specific passions and to the inevitable vacillations and conflicts they bring to human life. The mind, as affirmation of an actually existing human body, strives to imagine or recollect things that enhance the body’s power of acting; and to keep before it the ideas which ‘exclude from existence’ the ideas of things that diminish that power of acting. These imaginings of course carry associated affects from the past, reflecting the paths traced by our bodies through the network of finite modes. So there will be conflict and vacillation within individual lives as well as between lives. Different bodies, carrying different traces of the past impingement of other bodies, will respond differently to present modification; and even the same body will respond differently at different times to similar modifications.

This interweaving of imaginings and affects does not stop at our own bodily borders. We strive to affirm, not only concerning ourselves, but also concerning those we love—those whose existence gives us joy—whatever we imagine to affect them with joy; and to ‘exclude the existence’ of what will affect them with sadness. This concern for others is for Spinoza not an altruism which it would make sense to contrast with an egoistic concern for ourselves. Spinoza sees it as following from the nature of imagination that, if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, we will necessarily be affected with a like affect. That the interaction of imaginings and affects must undermine the opposition between egoism and altruism is necessitated by the fact that imagination for Spinoza involves both the nature of our body and at the same time the present nature of the external body (IIIP27D).

For Spinoza, to have images at all is to be aware of other bodies together with our own. The similarities between bodies are here not a matter of common properties, intellectually discerned; rather we apprehend them through direct bodily awareness, involving both our own and other bodies. This inescapable aspect of human experience—the implication of other bodies in even the most immediate of bodily experience—gives rise as much to conflict as to harmony. Our joys and sorrows, our loves and our hates, are all alike grounded in our bodily imaginings; and good and evil are constructed out of joy and sorrow—out of the satisfaction of frustration of longing. Rather than desiring something because we judge it to be good, we call it good because we desire it. ‘Consequently, what we are averse to we call evil’ (IIIP39S). Each of us from our own affects judges things good or bad, useful or useless.

So Spinoza’s claim is not, as Bennett suggests, that, from the impersonal fact that something is useful or good for us, it mysteriously follows that we do it. Nor does he rely on an indefensible doctrine of ‘harmony through similarity’ to reconcile egoism with collaborative
morality. The claim is rather that all that it means to say that a thing is good or useful to us is that we desire it. We do not strive for an independently identifiable good; what is good is just what we strive for. This is not to deny the obvious commonalities in what human beings strive for, and hence in human goods. Spinoza is not committed to rejecting all idea of a unitary good. Our imaginings reflect the diversity of our bodies and their different paths through the world. But our affects reflect what is common to our natures. We do not envy, he says, what is peculiar to another’s nature and alien to our own, any more than we envy trees their height or lions their strength (IIIP53S).

The good, nonetheless, cannot for Spinoza be inferred directly from any universal truths about human nature, but only mediately through actual strivings, appetites and desires. There is for him an affective dimension to essence itself; and it is in keeping with his commitment to individual essences that here—in the common order of nature—the affects of individuals will differ. ‘Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other’ (IIIP57). It is worth noticing here the higher order pleasure which Spinoza calls gaudium—the characteristic pleasure which goes with being a horse or a man. The

soul of a horse or a man is expressed in—indeed, it seems, is identical with—what is distinctive about their lusts. There is an equine soul—an equine gladness—which goes with satisfying equine lusts. The horse thrives as a horse—the human as a human—in having distinctive pleasures. The lusts and appetites of horses, fishes and men differ; and their distinctive pleasures are constitutive of their very souls. These soul-characterising joys can differ also within a species. There is ‘no small difference’, Spinoza says, between ‘the gladness by which a drunk is led and the gladness a philosopher possesses’ (IIIP57S).

All this is true of the affects insofar as we are ‘acted on’—of the emotions, considered as passions. There are also affects related to us insofar as we act; and the relations and contrasts between the two kinds of affect provide the key to Spinoza’s account—to be developed later in the work—of the remedy of the passions through the higher forms of knowledge. Wherever the mind considers itself and its power of acting it passes to a greater state of activity, and hence ‘rejoices’. Because the mind knows itself only through being aware of the modifications of the body of which it is the idea, the imagination is caught up in this passion of joyful self-contemplation (IIIP53). But there are also affects of joy and desire which are not passions. The conceiving of adequate ideas is itself a source of joy and desire (IIIP58 and D). Sadness, however, involves a diminishing or restraining of the mind’s power of acting. So it cannot be related to the mind insofar as it acts, but only insofar as it is acted on. These affects of joy and desire, arising solely from the activity of the mind in adequate ideas, give rise in turn to strength of character, to tenacity—the desire by which we strive ‘solely from the dictates of reason’ to preserve our being—and to nobility—the desire by which we strive to aid others and join with them in friendship (IIIP59S).

We can now see the broad picture of Spinoza’s treatment of emotion. Affects and ‘vacillations’ arise from the three ‘primitive’ affects: desire, joy and sadness. Where these act on mind as ‘external causes’ we are ‘like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds’, tossing about, not knowing our outcome and fate. But there are also joys and desires which arise, not from external causes, but from the mind’s own activity in conceiving adequate ideas. In the later Parts,
Spinoza will show how the mind can make transitions from the one kind of affect to the other. But although the passions are remedied through reason, Spinoza’s story is not one of the replacement of unruly destructive passion by a morally superior faculty. Just as his version of imagination can be seen as a constitutive force, rather than as an aberration, so too the passions have a positive role in human life. Although the contrary winds of passion drive the mind about like waves on the sea, they can set it in positive directions as well as negative ones:

very often it happens that while we are enjoying a thing we wanted, the body acquires from this enjoyment a new constitution, by which it is differently determined, and other images of things are aroused in it; and at the same time the mind begins to imagine other things and desire other things.

(IIIP59S)

Passions and imagination interact—often destructively—but also in ways that create points of transition out of diminishment into *conatus* strengthening activity. Later we shall see how the process of understanding even the negative interactions of passion and imagination can transform passion into joyous activity. But first Spinoza draws together for us his account of emotion, both in its specific detail and in its general upshot.

This is an account of emotion which emphasises the awareness of body. But what interests Spinoza for the general course of the *Ethics* is not what he calls the ‘external affections’ of body—‘trembling, paleness, sobbing, laughter, and the like’. Those affections, he says, are ‘related to the body only, without any relation to the mind’ (IIIP59S). Spinoza’s dismissive attitude to these ‘external’ aspects of emotion echoes again some aspects of ancient Stoic discussion of emotion. If anyone thinks, says Seneca in his discussion of anger,

that pallor, floods of tears, sexual arousal, heavy breathing or a sudden brightening of the eyes and the like, are evidence of passion and a mark of the mind, he is mistaken and fails to realize that these are bodily drives.

(Long and Sedley 1987:419)

Such bodily states are, for Spinoza too, external to the affects—incidental bodily accompaniments. But there are for him other states of bodily awareness—awareness of bodily transitions to greater or less activity—which are constitutive of the affects. Spinoza articulates an awareness of body which is not in that way ‘external’ to mind; but this is an awareness, not of incidental bodily accompaniments to the affects, but of bodily transitions which are constitutive of them.

The point emerges more clearly in the detail of Spinoza’s concluding definitions of the affects. In understanding and evaluating these definitions, we need to keep in mind why the affects are so crucial for him. It is true that he is committed to rationally understanding the nature of the passions, on the model of geometry’s concern with lines and planes. But he is not simply adding the passions to the realm of disinterested scientific investigation. What is
crucial for the ethical upshot of this scrutiny of the passions is how they relate to mind and body together—how they relate to us as ideas of body. Here the ingenuity of Spinoza’s adaptation of ancient themes from Hellenistic philosophy to the ideals of seventeenth-century scientific understanding becomes apparent.

For the Stoics, the life of passion was a life lacking in rational judgment. The wise man—the sage—is not free of rational emotions. But he is at any rate free of emotions which rest on false assumptions, contrary to reason, about what matters in life. The wise shed all fears that rest on the belief that the possession of property or of continued health is what makes a good life, or on the belief that death is the greatest disaster that can befall us. ‘It is not things themselves that disturb men’, says Epictetus, ‘but their judgments about things.’ Death is nothing terrible; what is terrible is the judgment that death is terrible. ‘So whenever we are impeded or disturbed or distressed, let us blame no one but ourselves, that is, our own judgments’ (Long and Sedley 1987:418).

Spinoza’s treatment of the emotions can be seen as ingeniously bringing together ancient Stoic repudiation of the passions as involving erroneous beliefs, and the apparently opposed Epicurean treatment of pleasure as the highest good, by uniting elements of each with seventeenth-century ideals of scientific understanding.

For Spinoza, as for the Stoics, the passions rest on inadequate understanding. For him, they incorporate inadequate ideas of transitions to greater or less power of acting. But insofar as we replace those inadequate ideas with more adequate ones, we move from passivity to activity—without, however, leaving the realm of affect. The mind’s transitions to greater activity are inherently joyful; and this emphasis on the replacement of painful passivities echoes the Epicurean philosophy. For Epicurus, pleasure is the basis of the good life; and the absence of pain is pleasure. ‘For this is what we aim at in all our actions—to be free from pain and anxiety,’ says Epicurus in his letter to Menoeceus (Long and Sedley 1987:113). For Spinoza not all pleasures are good. But, where a pleasure is bad, that is because it involves passivity; and that passivity can be removed through understanding it—an understanding which is, in turn, a source of joy.

Keeping in mind that Spinoza’s treatment of emotion is framed by the concerns of ancient Hellenistic philosophy, as well as by the ideals of contemporary seventeenth-century science, can help us understand the aspects of the affects he singles out as noteworthy in his concluding definitions. It can also help us appreciate the elegance and ingenuity of his ‘general definition of the affects’. Out of the complex and often bleak multiplicity of the interactions of imaginings and passions, there emerges an ordering around three carefully defined ‘primitive’ affects: desire, joy and sadness. Not only do all the affects arise from these three; they are all, Spinoza tells us at the end of his specific definitions, in fact nothing but these three—differently named though they may be on account of their ‘varying relations and extrinsic denominations’ (DefAffXLVIIIExp).

By taking desire, joy and sadness as primitive, Spinoza directs our attention to aspects of the non-primitive affects we might otherwise not see. They all involve transition to greater or less power of acting. The affects, like the ideas which they incorporate, are dynamic states. The Stoics had built into their account of emotion a notion of ‘impulse’ closely connected with ‘assent’. And for Spinoza too there is no affect without mental movement. That is why wonder, involving as it does a stasis in the mind—a lack of movement from ‘regarding one
thing to thinking of others’ (DefAffIVExp)—is not, for Spinoza, strictly an affect at all. Joy is the passage from lesser to greater perfection; sadness the passage from greater to lesser. And our very essence is desire—also conceived as a dynamic transition: the strivings, impulses, appetites and volitions which pull us in different directions.

What is salient about love in Spinoza’s taxonomy of the affects is not, as Descartes had argued in the Passions of the Soul, that it seeks union with the loved object but simply that it is ‘joy, accompanied by the idea of an external cause’ (DefAffVI). In the lack of free will, what matters about love is the satisfaction in the lover on account of the presence of the thing loved. The Stoic ideal of an untroubled freedom from the disturbance of passion here joins forces with Epicurean delight in the positive pleasure of a present existence free of pain. Already we can see here an ethic emerging which will repudiate what Spinoza sees as the ‘negative’ states of humility and despondency in favour of self-enhancing joyful powers. Once we have seen that such states are ‘negative’, Spinoza thinks, we will see also that valuing them rests on an illusion. These affects of humility and despondency are very rare, Spinoza ironically remarks, for human nature, considered in itself, strains against them, as far as it can. ‘So those who are believed to be most despondent and humble are usually most ambitious and envious’ (DefAffXXIXExp).

Distilling the order of the passions into his remarkable ‘general definition of the affects’, which concludes Part Three, Spinoza now spells out how the affects involve both bodily transition and cognition. The definitions of joy, sadness and desire are incorporated into the definition of what it is to be a passion at all. Those affects which are passions are confused ideas affirming greater or less ‘force of existing’, determining the mind to think of one thing rather than another. The cognitive element here, Spinoza stresses, is not a matter of an intellectual comparison of the body’s present constitution with the past. The point is rather that the passion involves an idea which affirms of the body in the present ‘something which really involves more or less of reality than before’ (General DefAff). There is no question here of a mistaken judgment of the kind that the Stoics incorporated into their account of emotion. In the state of passion we are immediately aware, although ‘inadequately’, of a transition to greater or less force of existing. The ‘error’ resides only in the inadequacy of the awareness. The way is now open for Spinoza’s treatment of the path to freedom and virtue as a process of replacing these inadequate ideas of transitions to greater or less activity with more adequate ones.

**Striving to persist: an ethic of joy**

It may seem that there is little scope for ethical ideals in a philosophy which treats freedom as nothing but ignorance of the determining causes of action. Spinoza’s comparison of the belief in free will to the fantasy of the stone, thinking it flies through the air by its own choice, may seem to deny all content to human virtue, rendering otiose any articulation of an ethic. Yet out
of this apparently unpromising material Spinoza constructs an ethic centred not on a dour fatalism but on joy.

In Part Three, imagination and affects draw together. In Part Four, both imagination and the affects come into relation with Spinoza’s treatment of the nature of reason and its power to take us from bondage into freedom. The mind’s transition to reason is by no means a shedding of affectivity. For Spinoza, as for the Stoics, as we have seen, the ideal is not to be free of emotion. Although the Stoic sage disdains passion, he tries to cultivate positive affects associated with reason. For Spinoza too the affects associated with reason must be good. But for him the passions are of themselves neither good nor bad. Like everything else, human passions are part of nature. The mind, being itself part of nature, cannot avoid them; it can, however, avoid being ‘determined to act’ by its passions. Let us now see what exactly the wise mind avoids.

Spinoza insists in the Preface to Part Four that human appetite is part of the chain of causes, although human beings are commonly ignorant of how it fits there. It is not something which could be prevented from having effects. Nor is it in any way unnatural. Nature—whether in general or in relation to specific kinds of thing—does not for Spinoza act as a norm. There is no ‘natural’ perfection or imperfection except what can be identified with a thing’s own power of acting. To pass from a lesser to a greater perfection is just to increase or diminish its power. A horse, Spinoza says, will be

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destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect. There is no ascending hierarchy of perfection in natural forms—no natural order in relation to which things can be judged good or bad. Here we see the ethical implications of Spinoza’s treatment, in the appendix to Part One, of the dependence of ideas of order on the imagination. Good and evil indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves. One and the same thing, he says, can be, at the same time, good, bad and indifferent: music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf. We can set before ourselves models of human nature, judging ourselves and others as perfect or imperfect according to how we approximate to them. But in none of this do we judge anything more than the powers of things to affect us to our advantage or disadvantage—to increase or diminish our own power. Good is what we know to be useful to us; evil is what we know to prevent us from being masters of some good (IVD1 and D2).

Two themes dominate Part Four of the Ethics. At first sight they are antagonistic: our inevitable vulnerability to passions; and our power, through reason, to overcome their destructive force. On the one hand, Spinoza repeatedly reminds us that, in the words of the Axiom of this Part, there is no singular thing in nature than which there is not something more powerful which can destroy it. Our power is limited by that of other things and ‘infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes’ (IVP3). On the other hand, through being ‘guided by reason’ human beings become free. The crucial thing to see is that these two opposed movements—into bondage and into freedom—are both located in the complex interweavings of affect and imagination which Spinoza has already described in Part Three. Since we are part of the ‘common order of nature’, it is inevitable that we are subject to changes of which we are not ourselves the adequate cause (IVP4D(ii)). The contrast is not between two opposed causal forces but between, as it were, different locations of causal power in relation to the self. Spinoza’s ideal is not to keep the passions in an inner domain of feeling—separate from the
outer moral realm of action. In avoiding the determining force of the passions, we do not keep them confined to an inner self. Although the passion of sadness is not of itself bad, the states of sadness associated with despondency or melancholy are for Spinoza always bad, even if they do not determine us to overt behaviour. Spinoza’s understanding of being ‘determined to act’ is not the idea of being forced into overt behaviour. It is something different—understood through the notions of causality and adequacy articulated earlier in the work. Whether we are ‘determined to act’ by passion or by reason is a matter of where we locate the causes of our activity. And here ideas of borders or limits—of what lies ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the self—operate differently from what we might expect from our more familiar Cartesian ideas of what is ‘internal’ or ‘external’ to the mind.

The ‘power of external causes’ and the ‘power by which we strive to persevere in existing’ do not represent rival agendas which compete for the status of determining cause of quite different outcomes. They do nonetheless represent different ‘strivings’ (conatus). The power of an affect, determined by an ‘external cause’, can surpass the ‘power of a man’ (IVP6D). It does so, however, not by introducing to the world something which would otherwise not be there at all, but by appropriating to itself the status of determining cause of what happens. The mind can either passively undergo the power of an ‘external’ determining cause or wrest from it, as it were, the status of determining cause. The challenge may initially sound like an exercise in self-deception, comparable to the fantasy of the flying stone. If we do think of ourselves as having the power to change the course of events are we not deceiving ourselves? But what Spinoza is now talking of is a state which arises, not from ignorance of causes, but precisely from understanding them.

By understanding the causes of what we undergo, we are supposed to appropriate to ourselves the status of determining cause. To clarify this crucial shift in the location of causal determination, Spinoza elaborates how the power of the affects interacts with the imagination. What we imagine, as we have earlier seen, we think of as present; and our imaginings indicate the constitution of our own bodies more than that of external things (IVP9D). Those imaginings which are affects will vary in intensity according as this ‘present existence’ of the external thing is maintained or ‘excluded’ by rival affective imaginings. This spectrum of variation allows Spinoza now to integrate into his treatment of imagination and affectivity the dimension of time, along with a more subtle treatment of modality. Affects relating to things past and future will be weaker than present imaginings; and we will be affected less intensely by things we imagine as in the distant past or future than by things more quickly or recently present. And the new, refined distinction between ‘contingency’ and ‘possibility’, which Spinoza invokes in the opening definitions of Part Four, allows him to discriminate further among affective responses.

‘Contingency’, in the use Spinoza gives it here, relates to essence; and ‘possibility’ relates to causes—to the position of the thing in the interconnected system of modes. The contingent is that for which—attending to its essence—we find nothing which either necessarily ‘posits’ its existence or necessarily ‘excludes’ it. The ‘possible’ is that for which—attending to the
causes from which it must be produced—we are given no knowledge of whether or not the causes are ‘determined to produce it’ (IVD3 and D4). The intensity of the affects, Spinoza goes on to argue, will vary according to how they are imagined. Affects towards things imagined as possible will be more intense than towards those which are merely imagined as contingent (IVP12D and C). But things imagined as ‘with us in the present’ will be more intense than what is imagined as either contingent or possible; and affects towards things imagined as necessary will be more intense, other things being equal, than those imagined as not necessary (IVP11). Spinoza’s version of the remedy of the passions draws on these relations of comparative intensity, in conjunction with the affective character of the ‘knowledge of good and evil’, which he defines in terms of joy and sadness. Imaginings ‘disappear’, not through ‘the presence of the true insofar as it is true’, but because they are excluded from present existence by other, stronger imaginings (IVP1S). And the affects, likewise, are ‘restrained’ by the ‘knowledge of good and evil’—not insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is itself considered as an affect (IVP14).

Insofar as reason can dispel the clouds of distracting and destructive passion and imagination, it is not because it possesses any inherent power which those states lack. Rather, it is because operations of reason themselves belong in the realm of desire and joy. From understanding truly there arises a desire which belongs to us ‘insofar as we act’—a desire whose ‘force and growth’ can be defined by ‘human power alone’ (IVP15D). Because this power of reason itself belongs with the affects, it is inherently liable to be ‘restrained or extinguished’ by the power of other affects. Insofar as it concerns the future, for example, the power of reason—along with other affects not directly related to present existence—can be easily overcome by the ‘pleasures of the moment’ (IVP16). The superiority of the higher forms of knowledge does not mean that reason has any inherently stronger force than the passions. But the unavoidable truths about passion connive with equally inexorable truths about reason to make possible a favourable outcome, grounded in the very necessities which seemed at first to set such severe limits to ideals of freedom. The strength of reason is for Spinoza the strength of human desire and human joy. Desire—the striving to persist in being—is our very essence. This desire is inherently joyful; and it will be aided or increased by other affects of joy (IVP18D). Desires arising from joy will be stronger than those arising from sadness; for they will be strengthened by joys, whereas desires arising from sadness can only be diminished by other affects of sadness (IVP18D).

Reason is thus associated with desire and joy; but, because to come to understand is always a transition to greater activity, reason is not associated with sadness. We now see the full irony of Spinoza’s version of reason. Like its traditional counterparts, it ‘demands nothing contrary to Nature’. But what this now means is that it is from reason that we love ourselves, seek our own advantage and strive as far as we can to preserve our own being. Reason remains the foundation of virtue, as it had been in the earlier philosophical tradition. But the content of virtue now becomes the striving to persist. Because the mind is the idea of a body that is part of nature, this striving to persist, in which virtue and happiness reside, necessarily involves our dealings with ‘things outside us’. The virtuous life does not demand isolation; rather it involves engagement with the rest of the world and especially, as we shall see, with things of like nature to ourselves—other minds also intent on virtuous striving to persist. Our inability to avoid the passivities of being acted on by external causes—our vulnerability to passion—emerges as the ethical analogue of the
body’s dependence on other bodies for its continual regeneration (II Post IV).

We are now entering the territory where Spinoza’s ethical concerns merge with his politics—a theory of human sociability and friendship, grounded in the physics of bodies. Spinoza offers both a vision of collaboration in the ideal state—a community of citizens acting in accordance with reason—and recommendations on the appropriate ways of governing a ‘multitude’ in which imagination rather than reason typically prevails. Our necessary exposure to the rest of nature is a source of strength—through collaboration with what is congenial to our nature—as well as of vulnerability to external, opposed forces. If two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, Spinoza says, they compose an individual ‘twice as powerful as each one’ (IVP18S). This arithmetic of social additions may well seem strange if we think in terms of our more usual understanding of individuals as separately existing units. But it comes out of Spinoza’s physics of bodies and provides the foundation for a view of sociability as resting on the combination of powers. Spinoza’s version of the rational state is a union of bodies, composing as it were ‘one mind and one Body’. Here all, by rationally seeking their own advantage, seek together the ‘common advantage of all’ (IVP18S). Self-seeking, no longer opposed to seeking the good of others, becomes the foundation of rational virtue.

In linking reason so closely to self-preservation and the pursuit of self-interest, Spinoza, on his own admission, is trying to win the attention of those who believe that the principle that everyone is bound to seek his own advantage is ‘the foundation, not of virtue and morality, but of immorality’. Sociability is for him not merely incidental to rational selfhood. This helps clarify his claim that ‘in neglecting our own advantage we neglect to preserve our being and hence lack power and virtue’ (IVP20 and D). Insofar as we are torn by affects which are passions, human beings are ‘contrary to one another’ (IVP34). But to the extent that we live according to ‘the guidance of reason’—i.e. understand the necessities of our appetites—we ‘agree in nature’ with other human beings. Agreement in nature is, in this context, not an underlying static and pre-existing sameness of nature which we come to recognise. It is rather a dynamic unfolding of commonalities achieved through collective action. Individual human powers are realised—and human identities are formed—under conditions of sociability. And there is no dichotomy here between the thriving of individuals and that of the collectivities they form with others. ‘When each man most seeks his own advantage for himself, then men are most useful to one another’ (IVP35C2). In seeking virtue we want the good, not only for ourselves but also for others (IVP37D). But all this presupposes that all are acting ‘from the guidance of reason’. And, as Spinoza constantly insists, that cannot be always the case, since we are part of nature and hence inevitably subject to passion.

Spinoza, foreshadowing Hume, and echoing Hobbes, recognises that, in the lack of the cultivation of reason, the multitude must be restrained by fear. ‘No affect can be restrained except by an affect stronger than and contrary to the affect to be restrained, and everyone refrains from doing harm out of timidity regarding a greater harm’ (IVP37S2). Spinoza’s theory of politics, no less than his ethics, is grounded in the view of the mind as idea of body. To bring our desires into accordance with reason is nothing but recognising the necessities of
our own nature—of our own appetite, which is ‘nothing but the very essence, or nature, of man’ (IVP19D). But this does not reduce rational action to compulsive behaviour. To act under the guidance of reason is to act with understanding; indeed we act only insofar as we understand (IVP24D).

Central to Spinoza’s ethic is the idea of joy in its varying forms. Joy is connected by definition with his idea of self-preservation. The dynamism of Spinoza’s modes links persistence with increasing activity and hence increasing perfection. In the crucial concept of conatus, ancient concepts of appetite are brought together with a new understanding of physical motion; Spinoza’s version of the freedom of reason, no less than his account of the bondage of passion, is grounded in his physics of bodies. Desire, joy and reason come together in the conatus of mind as idea of body.

Spinoza’s concept of conatus is poised between, on the one hand, his development of an ethic centred on joy and, on the other, his repudiation of suicide as unthinkable by a rational mind. In this ethic, striving and thriving are inseparable. Where we have a well-functioning self—striving and thriving—there we have joy. Paralleling this on the other, darker, side of his concept of conatus is the claim that self-destruction is so unthinkable that the rational mind simply cannot encompass the idea. The rational mind’s existence and the thought of suicide are so antagonistic that where on one is the other cannot be.

Let us look first at joy. For Spinoza it is not a single concept but a cluster of related ones. The term translated by Curley as ‘joy’ is laetitia—the transition to greater activity and perfection. This joy, as we have seen, belongs with tristitia (pain) and cupiditas (desire) among the three ‘primary affects’ out of which all the others are constructed. There is also gaudium, translated by Curley as ‘gladness’: a higher order pleasure, which Spinoza contrasts with libido (translated by Curley as ‘lust’). Gaudium accompanies, as we have seen, the satisfaction of a thing’s distinctive pleasures; there is a soul-characterising equine gladness which goes with satisfying equine lusts. Finally, there is the concept Spinoza develops in Part Four: the elusive but crucial concept of hilaritas, translated by Curley as ‘cheerfulness’.

Hilaritas is a higher order joy in a different way from gaudium. It is a pleasure of reflection that goes beyond the mind’s joy in engaging in unimpeded activity in the here and now. Hilaritas arises from the mind’s capacity to hold the fragments of consciousness together in a whole not confined to the present. It pertains to the activity of a body as a union of parts. But to grasp the concept of hilaritas, we have to think of ourselves as not just spatial but temporal unities. Hilaritas bears a different relation to time from that of mere pleasure. This helps explain why Spinoza says that hilaritas, unlike pleasure, is ‘more easily conceived than observed’ (IVP44S). For it involves a balancing out of the pleasures of a body which is a unity of a ‘great many parts of different natures’—an accommodation which is achieved not through the suppression of pleasures but by engaging in a wide range of different activities over time (IVP42 and D). In his famous evocation of the wise life as a joyous one, Spinoza tells us that it is ‘the part of a wise man’ to ‘refresh and restore himself with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports and the theatre (IVP45S). Here
again the pleasures of the mind and those of the body are interconnected. But of course Spinoza cannot allow that they might causally produce one another. The point is rather that the mind of a flourishing body will have as its objects a greater variety of modifications than the mind of a body less open to external stimulation.

Indeed, the human body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which require continuous and varied food, so that the whole body may be equally capable of doing everything which can follow from its nature, and consequently, so that the mind may also be equally capable of conceiving many things.

(IVAppXXVII)

*Hilaritas* is more readily conceived than observed because it is never really there at any one time. It involves a body engaged in a range of activities over time. The wise go to the theatre, look at plants, and so on. But they cannot do all these things at once. And, if they do any of them to the exclusion of the others, they risk having their pleasures take on a fixity that is akin not to wisdom but to madness. The ideal body here is not one driven to ever greater activity, as in a relentless exercise programme. That model of greater activity captures, rather, the state Spinoza calls *titillatio*, translated by Curley as *pleasure*; it is attributed to a person insofar as some bodily part or parts undergo a transition to greater activity. Such pleasure can be ‘excessive and evil’ (IVP43 and D), because it involves one or several bodily parts being affected more than the others. The power of such an affect can surpass the other actions of the body. It can become ‘stubbornly fixed’, keeping the body from the ideal state of being affected in a great many ways. Here pain, insofar as it restrains excessive pleasure, can be good. All that, Spinoza says, is readily related to our observations of bodies in action: ‘the affects by which we are daily torn are generally related to a part of the body which is affected more than the others’ (IVP44S). The state of *hilaritas*, in contrast, involves an assessment of a life over time. In this respect *hilaritas* is similar to *eudaemonia*, the Aristotelian concept of happiness.

The comparison with Aristotle can help us see why Spinoza claims there cannot be an excess of *hilaritas*. Since Aristotle’s *eudaemonia* involves the assessment of a life as a whole, it would be nonsensical to find a life defective for having too much of it. Despite Aristotle’s preoccupation with finding the mean in all things, this is something it makes no sense to overdo. Likewise, the attribution of *hilaritas* involves the assessment of a human being as a temporal whole. But this can only be a partial analogy. Spinoza’s *hilaritas* stands in a very different relation to his concept of the good from that in which Aristotle’s *eudaemonia* stands to his; for self-preservation, as we have seen, has become for Spinoza the foundation and end of virtue—the good itself. The good, rather than being identified independently of the self-preservation necessary to achieve it, now consists just in preserving our being. The endeavour to persist in being—to persist in doing the things the doing of which is what it is to be that thing—becomes the thing’s good, its distinctive pleasure, its very soul. The shift can be seen in the twist Spinoza gives to the obvious and at first sight banal truth that if we want to live well we must first live. ‘No one can desire to be blessed, to act well and to live well, unless at the same time he desires to be, to act, and to live, that is, to actually exist’ (IVP21). To be, to act, to live, rather than being a formal prerequisite for virtue, becomes what we desire in desiring virtue—the thing itself.
Hilaritas is the reflective joy a thriving human being is able to take in having in this sense ‘a life’—in being a unified whole in which a wide range of pleasures come together, without any having the ‘stubborn fixity’ that inhibits others. So, in the case of human beings, hilaritas (cheerfulness) complements and completes gaudium (gladness). There seems to be no analogue of this for the equine pleasures Spinoza discusses in Part Three (IIIIP57S). There is no equine hilaritas; for the body of the horse lacks the complexity which enables the human body to retain traces of experiences from which it can form common notions. Spinoza may of course be wrong about the physiology of horses. The important point is that the capacity for hilaritas depends on a certain physiological complexity. That complexity allows the comparisons between different experiences which yields his version of the common notions of reason. So hilaritas is a pleasure of reason; but it has its basis in complexity of bodily structure.

Let us turn now to suicide. Spinoza’s claim is that it is never rational and never free. So close for Spinoza is the identification between self-preservation and essence that the sources of a thing’s destruction must lie, as he puts it, ‘outside’ the thing (IVP 19P20 and S). Wherever we seem to act contrary to our natural conatus, it is due to some physical or psychological compulsion, both of which are to be considered external. The point is not that it is difficult to think of a thing’s destruction. On the contrary, Spinoza constantly invokes in these sections the opening Axiom that there is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. For every finite thing—the human mind included—there is something more powerful which can destroy it. But those hostile forces—which can, and eventually will, destroy us—lie outside us. While we attend only to the thing itself and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything that can destroy it. Each thing is opposed to everything that can take its existence away. So each thing—as far as it can by its own power—strives to persevere in being. By adding the uncontroversial claim that reason demands nothing ‘contrary to our nature’, Spinoza is able to conclude that reason demands that we love ourselves and seek to preserve our own being as far as we can. It follows, he suggests, that those who kill themselves are ‘weakminded’ and completely conquered by external causes, contrary to their nature (IVP18S).

Spinoza’s treatment of suicide can sound like a variation of the old philosophical theme of the divided self. The idea of reason as the highest aspect of being human has often been associated with identifying it with the true self. Suicide is then seen as one of those things real selves just do not do. But Spinoza’s point is not at all that we preserve ourselves by keeping at bay what lies beyond the borders of the true self. On the contrary, as we have seen, he thinks it follows from our being part of nature that we can never bring it about that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being (IVP18D). The point is not that the self will stay in existence as long as it manages to keep external to it all those forces which can destroy it. The point is, on the contrary, that it needs to join forces with other things. But, as we have also seen, its doing so is precisely what is involved in the life of reason. To the extent that we do live ratio-

nally, joining ourselves with what can enhance our conatus, we cannot seek our own self-destruction. So suicide and rationality are at odds. Someone may be forced by a tyrant—as Seneca was—to turn a sword against himself; or hidden external causes might make his body
‘take on another nature’, of which there is no idea in his mind. But that a human being should, from the necessity of his own nature, strive not to exist, or strive to be changed into another form, is as impossible, Spinoza says, as that something should come from nothing. ‘Anyone who gives this a little thought will see it’ (IVP20S).

Spinoza is here repudiating the ethic of noble suicide associated with some of the Stoics; and he is at the same time repudiating the tendency to make a virtue of self-denial. He is not denying the possibility of suicide. To imagine it we need only imagine ourselves overcome by external causes; we can do that all too readily. The possibility of being thus overcome is the other side of the coin to what is positive about being part of nature, able to benefit from exposure to, and collaboration with, what lies outside ourselves. Being fully part of nature, we are both vulnerable to external forces and able to join with some of them in forming more powerful individuals. Spinoza is not trying to make suicide harder to imagine, he is rejecting its Stoic associations with reason and virtue. It is not our sympathy that he wants us to withhold from suicide, but our admiration. When suicide occurs, it is always ‘against reason’—not because it cannot be explained, but because the explanation can never be given in terms of causes located entirely within the self destroyed. Nothing can cease to exist unless something external, more powerful than it, makes it do so. We may say that Seneca dies by his own hand; but the real source of his destruction is the tyrant. His hand moves under the influence of an external cause, although he is not subjected to brute compulsion; that I move my hand does not suffice for my action to be ‘free’. What Spinoza wants us to see is that the cases that look like rational self-destruction are more plausibly seen as cases of destruction under the influence of something outside us or as cases of ‘weak-mindedness’, where we are not ourselves. External forces can temporarily overcome us, so that we know not what we do; and when that happens we do not act rationally or freely.

Is Spinoza right to deny all possibility of free, rational suicide? His conclusion may seem like verbal trickery. But to do him justice, we must avoid foisting on him the model of the self as a divided soul, in which reason reigns in an inner citadel resisting the intrusion of the non-rational. The agent of my suicide is not me; but this is not because it is some inferior part of a divided self, rather than the ‘true’ self of reason. Faced with the claim that there can be no rational suicide, we tend to think of a self withdrawn behind its borders. What did the deed, we think, was not the real self but rather some intruder from the realm of passion, forcing an entry into the citadel. Such metaphors are not altogether inappropriate to Descartes’s treatment of reason and the passions in The Passions of the Soul. But they are inappropriate to Spinoza. For him, we do not gain our true selves by withdrawing behind our frontiers. We become most ourselves by opening out to the rest of nature. Our lack of insulation from the world is the source both of our vulnerability to alien conatus and of the power we gain from joining forces with congenial ones. For Spinoza, a supposedly rational suicide would have to be one in which my own powers combine with others that strengthen them, enhancing my being, putting me into the state of increased activity which is joy—and, in doing all that, destroy me. A rational suicide would destroy my powers by increasing them. To imagine that would, he thinks, be the same absurdity, in relation to ceasing to exist, as to suppose that something might begin to exist from nothing.

The idea of selfhood that emerges in these sections is both interesting and paradoxical. What is it to be a self whose very essence is its own preservation—a self that cannot have too much hilaritas; a self that cannot rationally seek its own self-destruction? What are the borders of
such a self? Despite his rejection of individual substances, Spinoza continues to talk in terms of a distinction between what lies inside and outside a self. But the borders of a Spinozistic self seem much more fluid than those of the more familiar Cartesian self, aligned with the distinction between mind and matter. The self of Descartes’s *Meditations* can in principle be separated out from its own body along with the rest of the world. There is an inner realm of mind, an outer one of body. Spinoza’s physics of bodies, and his treatment of the collective powers of socialised bodies, seem to involve both a preservation and a blurring of the limits between bodies. Can he coherently use the metaphor of borders at all? How does a Spinozistic self draw limits between the preservation of itself and the preservation of other things? Is there room for doubt here about it being me that persists in being?

There is indeed much that seems paradoxical about the Spinozistic self. But we do not have to see the paradoxes as an expression of confusion on Spinoza’s part. There is a shift here into new territory in philosophical thought about selfhood. Spinoza directs our attention to the temporal aspects of being a self—to the temporal dimensions of the predicaments of selfhood. The challenge articulated in Descartes’s *Meditations* was to establish contact with a world fundamentally external to the self. The predicament concerns the self’s relations to the rest of the world at any one time. In Spinoza’s philosophy that predicament of selfhood disappears. There is for him no room for real doubt about the existence of the world—no possibility of scepticism of the kind Descartes played with and thought he resolved by appeal to the existence of a non-deceiving God. Self-consciousness now arises within a world of which the self is undoubtedly a part—a world whose existence can never be in real doubt. Whereas Descartes managed to regard the existence even of his own body as external to himself and hence dubitable, for Spinoza that doubt cannot be coherently expressed. The mind is the idea of a body which is what it is, and does what it does, by virtue of being part of wider wholes reaching up to the totality of the material world. But Spinoza’s philosophy now engages with a different challenge, arising from the self’s relations with time.

In being the idea of a human body, with all its complex parts and their conflicting activities, the self has a much more complex relation to time than those things—including simple animate things—which simply endure through time, retaining nothing of what has impinged on them in the past. It is not just the modifications of bodily parts which must be synchronised in a well-functioning union. The mind must also bring together into unity fragments of experience that stay with us as a result of our complex bodily structure. The Spinozistic self is both the idea of an actually existing body, moving into a future, and the idea of all that has been retained of that body’s past. The mind struggles to make itself a unity—a well-functioning temporal as well as spatial whole. In the context of this view of the self as a constant effort to articulate itself, and to maintain itself in being amidst the wider wholes on which it depends, borders become unstable. Human bodies—considered at a given time as externally perceived objects—remain distinct among the larger individuals they form with other things. The body of which I am the idea can be rendered passive or destroyed by rival *conatus*. It can also have its powers enriched through interaction with congenial *conatus* in good patterns of sociability, without
ceasing to be distinguishable as the individual body it is. Spinoza’s treatment of individuality in terms of relations of motion and rest does not prevent us from distinguishing between bodies. But in its relations to time, the borders of the self are less stable. The mind’s capacity for imagination and memory, although a precondition for reason, is also a source of instability—of a lack of fixity.

Spinoza plays off against each other these two dimensions of selfhood: the self’s relations to the spatial world, in the here and now, and its relations to time. His dynamic physics of bodies provides the nexus between the two. This is what makes his paradoxes of selfhood fruitful. The mind, as idea of a human body, has a past; it has, in the relevant sense, a ‘life’ that can be ethically evaluated. Its having a past is due to the human capacity to compare different bodily traces. That capacity makes possible the formation of common notions and hence the passage from imagination to reason. Imagination makes reason possible by enabling the mind to have a past in a way that goes beyond mere existence through time. The mind, as idea of a body which endures, retains its past; and this retention allows it to make the comparisons between experiences which will issue in common notions. Although it gives the mind a different relation to time from that which the body has, this crucial capacity for abstraction is not independent of body. The capacity to have—in this fuller sense—a past, and to reflect upon it, is for Spinoza grounded in the physics of the human body. But it yields an open-ended source of new possibilities: an internal multiplicity of selfhood. This multiplication of possibilities of what the self can be and do is kept under restraint by the limitations of powers of the here-and-now self—the

actually existing union of bodies, which has persisted into the present and is now exposed to external causes.

Both these dimensions of selfhood are essential. In understanding ourselves, we move, as it were, between two registers. Their differences become more apparent in later philosophy, especially in Kant’s distinction in the *Critique of Pure Reason* between the empirical self and the ‘unity of apperception’—the self as object of present perception and the self as a temporal unity. But Spinoza, despite the paradoxes of his treatment of the self, had already shifted the philosophical agenda away from the dilemmas of the self’s relations with a supposedly external world. His political writings, which are echoed here in Part Four of the *Ethics*, can be read as exploring the implications of this shift for the dynamics of socialised bodies. The restraints on my powers as an individual body—enduring, like any other finite thing, through time—set limits to what I can bring together out of the rich and confusing deliverances of memory and imagination, to make a whole. Those powers are enriched through good patterns of sociability and impeded by bad ones. The elusive state of *hilaritas*, of which—if we can only have it at all—we cannot have too much, is a matter of getting it all together—not just as a cheerful union of bodies in the here and now, but as a continuing balancing out of all that makes our consciousness what it is in a complex physical and social world, so that no one thing becomes ‘stubbornly fixed’ as the answer to the question: ‘What am I?’

The ‘free man’

Spinoza, as we have seen, does not endorse any ideal of affectless action. Nor does he think it is always undesirable to act from those affects which are passions. Pity is useless in one who
lives according to the guidance of reason. But in one who is not guided by reason, to act from pity is preferable to withholding assistance. One who is moved to aid others neither by reason nor by pity is ‘rightly called inhuman’; for he seems to be ‘unlike a man’ (IVP50S). Spinoza makes a similar claim about fear: it is better to act from the affects associated with reason than from fear; but for those incapable of acting from reason, it is better to be afraid than unafraid. ‘The mob is terrifying if unafraid’ (IVP54S). Central to Spinoza’s idea of true freedom—outlined in the concluding propositions of Part Four and the first half of Part Five—is the claim that ‘to every action to which we are determined from an affect which is a passion, we can be determined by reason, without that affect.’ But the ideal here is not to shed all affect. Rather, it is to transform those affects which are passions into different affects—affects of joy associated with understanding ourselves and our actions (IVP59).

Spinoza’s version of freedom is not freedom from affect; nor is it freedom of will. Deleuze, in Spinoza: A Practical Philosophy, sums up Spinoza’s view of freedom as the coming into possession of our ‘power of acting’. It is a matter of our conatus being ‘determined by adequate ideas from which active affects follow’ (Deleuze 1970:70-1)—affects which are explained by our own essence. Desires arising from reason are our very essence. Such desires arise in us ‘insofar as we act’; they cannot be excessive, any more than our human nature could exceed itself or do more than it can (IVP61D). Although the free mind is not determined by those affects which are passions, it is not without affect. The desires that arise in the mind from reason arise from a joy which cannot be excessive (IVP63D)—desires which relate to what we know to be most important in life (IVP66S).

Attitudes to time and mortality are central to Spinoza’s articulation of freedom, making a link between these concluding passages of Part Four and the concern with eternity in the second half of Part Five. Insofar as we conceive things ‘from the dictate of reason’, we are affected equally whether the idea is of things future, past or present; for reason, unlike imagination, conceives things under the species of eternity or necessity (IVP62D). Led by reason rather than by fear, the free man thinks of nothing less than of death. His wisdom, Spinoza says, is ‘a meditation on life, not on death’ (IVP67D). Spinoza here seems to equate thinking of death with fearing it. The content of these lyrical passages is elusive. The point becomes clearer if we keep in mind Spinoza’s concern throughout Part Four with the connections between ethical consciousness and striving for self-preservation. Fearing death is contrasted with desiring to live (IVP68S). The joyous desires of the free are not mediated through the knowledge of good and evil—through fear or hope. They desire the good directly (IVP67D). Were we born free, Spinoza says, we would form no concept of good and evil. The enjoyment of living would of itself make us seek our self-preservation and our good. Spinoza’s formulation of these points is provocative. The free man does not seek his good through a dour setting aside of pleasure in favour of what reason dictates; he seeks it with a directness and a joy that bypass the need for any imposition of threats or fear of consequences. But human beings are of course not ‘born free’. The hypothesis is false and can be conceived only if we abstract human nature out from our understanding of its broader contexts (IVP68S).
Spinoza juxtaposes apparent truths about human nature, considered in itself, with an insistence on the fictional character of such abstractions. If we do not keep that insistence in mind, Spinoza’s version of the ‘free life’ as the life lived in accordance with the dictates of reason will sound deceptively familiar. His ‘free man’ strives, for example, to avoid the favours of the ignorant. That description may well evoke Aristotle’s famous description in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book IV, Ch. 3) of the man whose virtues are crowned by pride: he confers benefits—as the mark of a superior man—but is ashamed of receiving them, lest he appear inferior (Book IV, Ch. 3; as in Aristotle 1941:993). But the independence of Spinoza’s free man is not an ideal of solitary and superior autonomy. It is only ‘as far as he can’ that the free man avoids the favours of the ‘ignorant’ (IVP70S). The force of the limitation here is not to evoke an impossible ideal which we must nonetheless struggle towards. The free man knows the necessity of avoiding the hatred of the ignorant; but he also knows his dependence on them in time of need. The wise are no less human—no less dependent on other human beings—than the ignorant.

The ideal of the free man is another of those fictions invoked by Spinoza to clarify, rather than to deplore, the human situation. The human being who really could do without others would be one who was not part of nature—one ‘born free’. As Deleuze stresses, for Spinoza human beings, rather than being born free, become or make themselves free (Deleuze 1970:70). And their freedom is not achieved through the solitary exercise of a virtuous will. It depends on social context—on their living in forms of social organisation which reflect and respond to ‘common life and common advantage’ (IVP73D). Spinoza sketches this process of becoming free in the concluding sections of Part Four. But the ideal is meant to be taken in conjunction with his realism about the modal status of minds and bodies. The goal of the ‘becoming’ here is not freedom of the illusory kind we could have only if we were ‘born free’. Out of the recognition of our modal status comes true freedom—the rational mind’s understanding that ‘all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature’, and that hence whatever it sees as troublesome or evil arises from its own disordered, mutilated and confused perception (IVP73S).

Spinoza’s point in these sections is fundamentally the same as his point in the appendix to Part One. Our mutilated perception does not distort for us a world in which everything really happens for the best in relation to our needs—or even one where all is really good. The world is neither good nor bad, independently of how things impinge on us. We now see the ethical upshot of shedding the distortions of self-centred perception. Such distorted perceptions project on to the world ‘goods’ that are really just a matter of what is to the advantage of the parts of nature which we ourselves are. There is no independently existing good which the rational mind strives to perceive. The free man, in striving to conceive things as they are in themselves, strives in that very process also to ‘act well and rejoice’ (IVP73S).

If we interpret the earlier parts of the *Ethics* as affirming a world in which there is no place for individuality—as affirming the transcending of imagination and of feeling in a rational consciousness free of affect—we will tend to read the sketch of the free man, in these concluding sections of Part Four, as a repudiation of all that does not accord with universal principles of reason. The life of the free man will then be the edifying but dreary life of the sage who has sacrificed pleasure for the dubious joys of reason. But if we take into account
the care with which Spinoza has previously articulated the role of imagination and affects in human life, and his repudiation of those philosophies which treat them as defects in human nature, a different picture emerges. The language in which Spinoza describes the life of the free man may echo more traditional celebrations of

reason; but the upshot of the ideal is very different. We should not overlook the irony of these passages. The wise man is not subject to irrational fear; but he is also free of the attraction to danger encouraged by more conventional understanding of the virtues. He is no less virtuous in avoiding dangers than in overcoming them; he chooses flight with the same tenacity or presence of mind as he chooses a contest (IVP69 and C).

Although the good resides in the exercise of rational understanding, what Spinoza sees as virtuous in reason is not at all its capacity to transcend particularity. The ‘man who is led by reason’ has as his highest desire the understanding of ‘all things which can fall under his understanding’—including all those ‘ways nearly infinite’ in which his nature is ‘forced to accommodate itself (IVAppIV and VI). In the cultivation of reason and virtue the mind finds its strength. It discovers its freedom through reflection on the ‘continuous and varied food’—literal and metaphorical—required by the body to allow it to do everything that follows from its nature. Mind becomes capable of conceiving many things and hence of freedom, through being the idea of a body capable of doing many things (IVAppXXVII).

The free man can want nothing except what is necessary and can be absolutely satisfied with nothing except what is true (IVAppXXXII). But in Spinoza’s version of what that involves the free man’s life is rich indeed. Wanting what is necessary may sound like an austere resignation—the acquiescence of a defeated will. But there is no will in this story; and no real defeat. The ‘wanting’ and the ‘satisfaction’ which the wise extend towards the necessary and the true are joyful affects of minds which know both the strength and the vulnerability of their status as finite strivings in the order of the whole of nature. That is an order which has no special concern with what offends or delights human beings. But to know this is to find a delight that is not a high-minded suppression of the ordinary joys of being human but rather a reflective understanding of those very joys. Rather than replacing them with rational analogues which—from the perspective of the more robust pleasures of ordinary life—are bound to seem insipid, Spinoza offers us reflective, active versions of those pleasures—free of the

passivity they can induce in the unreflective mind, but retaining their dynamic energy.

Spinoza goes on to insist, in the Preface to Part Five, that the understanding of the passions is of itself their ‘remedy’. But how exactly is understanding a passion supposed to yield this transformation? It may well seem like wishful thinking to suggest that we can escape the sadness of passion simply by understanding it. ‘What comfort’, bemoans the disillusioned philosopher in Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas, ‘can truth and reason afford me? Of what effect are they now, but to tell me my daughter will not be restored?’ (Johnson 1759:41). Reason serves only to make clearer the bereavement which has transformed his dispassionate calm into inconsolable grief. A clear perception of the basis of our passions may intensify rather
than allay them; and philosophic calm may rest more on self-deception than on a clear grasp of our situation.

It is initially easier to grasp the ‘remedy’ Spinoza repudiates than to get a clear view of his own alternative. In the Preface to Part Five, he gives us a helpful picture of what he wants to reject in a scathing attack on one strand in Stoic thought on the power of reason: the idea that the will has causal power to change the course of the passions by changing our habits.

If I remember rightly, someone tried to show this by the example of two dogs, one a house dog, the other a hunting dog. For by practice he was finally able to bring it about that the house dog was accustomed to hunt, and the hunting dog to refrain from chasing hares.

The view under attack is given a modern twist by Descartes in his notorious treatment of the will’s power to exert a counter-force to the causal power of the animal spirits which produce passivities in the mind. Descartes discusses the dogs illustration in Part One, Section 50 of The Passions of the Soul (Cottingham et al. 1985: I, 348). The image expresses, as Spinoza suggests, an identification of the power of reason with the causal power of the will; and it leads us to think that the power of reason over the passions can be ‘absolute’. In the same section of The Passions of the Soul, Descartes claims that the overcoming of the passions is something that lies within the reach

of every rational mind. ‘There is no soul so weak that it cannot, if well-directed, acquire an absolute power over its passions.’ Descartes’s commitment to this ‘absolute’ power of reason seems itself to be less than absolute. It is tempered, in the concluding sections of The Passions of the Soul, by a realistic assessment of the limitations on what we can achieve in remedying the passions. Although the power of the rational will may be in principle ‘absolute’, it can do little to remedy the passions, in the here and now, for a mind not schooled in virtuous habits and strengthened by the knowledge of good and evil. ‘But I must admit that there are few people who have sufficiently prepared themselves in this way for all the contingencies of life’ (Cottingham et al. 1985: I, 403). The metaphor of the dogs does nonetheless encourage us to think of the power of reason as a power of a rational will. For Spinoza, in contrast, the power of reason is the power of understanding. An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it (VP3). And there is no affect of which we cannot form some clear and distinct concept (VP4C).

Although, with respect to any one passion, it is possible for us, through forming a clear idea of it, to free ourselves of its negative power, there is no way we could do that for all the passions. That much could apply also to Descartes’s version of the tension: human weakness being what it is, the ideal state of ‘absolute’ freedom cannot be maintained through the whole of a life. But there is more at stake in Spinoza’s repudiation of the ‘absolute’ power of reason over the passions than the unavoidable limitations human weakness sets to the achievability of any ethical ideal. For Spinoza, despite the fact that there is no affect that cannot be clearly understood, freedom is always a relative matter. For it involves the proportion of clear ideas to inadequate ones in the constitution of the mind. The process of becoming free is for Spinoza inherently incompletable. We have the power to bring it about that we understand ourselves and our affects, and hence to be less acted on by them. But a mind in which all affects were clearly understood would be a mind which was not part of nature. The system of
ideas which constitutes the mind as idea of a particular body is not a closed one. In understanding an affect we separate it from the thought of external causes, joining it instead to ‘true thoughts’—to ideas which we adequately understand and which can hence be regarded as no longer external to the self. But, although the affect is then associated not with sadness but with joy, it is not as if something has disappeared from the total network of causes. The mind has power to destroy the causes of its sadness, not through obliterating these causes, but only through understanding their causal force.

In a remark which could be read as a direct response to Descartes’s story of the causal power of the will to change the ‘natural’ direction of the animal spirits, Spinoza stresses that ‘the appetite by which a man is said to act, and that by which he is said to be acted on, are one and the same’ (VP4S). In the mind not led by reason, the desire that others live like us is the passion of ambition; in the mind led by reason, it is ‘the action, or virtue, called morality’. We cannot destroy the appetite; but we can change its setting and hence its upshot. To return to the deplorable state of Samuel Johnson’s philosopher—whose power of reason makes him more acutely aware of his loss and hence more hopelessly immersed in grief—loving the dead can, in the unreflective mind, give rise to the miseries of grief—sadness at the thought of what is no longer present. But the same love, in a reflective mind, might yield a more joyful thought of the dead—a delight in what has been.

The relations between imagination, time and modality, which Spinoza touched on in Part Four, here take on a richer dimension (VP5). The power of reason and the power of the affects which are passions do not engage as competing forces with totally different outcomes. They are, rather, competing sources of what, from a broader perspective, can be seen as the same affective states. The natural operations of the imagination interact with the power of the affects to determine where the greater power will lie. Negative and positive aspects of the same operations of imagining are at stake in these contests. What we imagine as ‘free’—that is, what we imagine in isolation from determining causes—will have a greater affective power than what we imagine as necessary; for what we feel towards it will not be deflected or diffused through a multiplicity of determining causes. This is a source of intensity for the passions. But, on the other hand, what reason apprehends as necessary takes on a rival power; for there is nothing which can be imagined as depriving such a thing of ‘presence’. If we ‘take account of time’, the affects aroused by reason will prevail even over those powerful passions which take their strength from an imagined freedom of the object. For these rational affects are related to the common properties of things, which we always ‘regard as present’ (VP7D).

It is interesting here that the superiority of reason does not arise from a detached concern with abstraction, somehow immune to affect. It arises from the power of reason to confront the mind with things it must always regard as present, in contrast to the fluctuating power of the imagination to convey presence. What is conveyed through imagination lacks stable presence. ‘Common properties’—the properties which, being shared by different things, are peculiar to none—are always regarded as present because there is nothing which can exclude their present existence; there can be no variation in the ways they come before the mind. Contrary
affects—emotions which are in opposition to one another—will therefore have to accommodate themselves to what is apprehended in this more constant way. Affects arising from imagination will be no less unstable than imagination itself. Affects arising from reason have a stability through time which will prevail over rival passions. Mind cannot bring about any causal effects in the modifications of body. But it can order and connect those bodily affections according to ‘the order of the intellect’ (VP10). Affects thus ‘ordered and connected’ have less power to render the mind passive than those which are ‘uncertain and random’ (VP10S). The wise mind can keep a grip, as it were, on things, even where it has no power to change or remove them.

This process of ordering our thoughts and images is very different from suppression. The ideal, again, centres on the affect of joy rather than on despondency at human folly:

if someone sees that he pursues esteem too much, he should think of its correct use, the end for which it ought to be pursued, and the means by which it can be acquired, not of its misuse and emptiness, and men’s inconstancy, or other things of this kind, which only someone sick of mind thinks of.

(VP10S)

In a shrewd diagnosis of the spurious wisdom of the moralists, Spinoza points out that those who ‘spew forth their anger’ about the folly of ambition are often really expressing their despair of attaining the honour they strive for: ‘it is certain that they most desire esteem who cry out most against its misuse, and the emptiness of the world’ (VP10S). The impoverished who are also greedy are preoccupied with the vices of the rich, showing that they cannot bear calmly either their own poverty or the wealth of others.

Intellect and imagination now join forces in the cause of attaining the orderings of thought and images which will bring freedom. Images are more easily joined where they relate to things we understand clearly, and they flourish in these associations which allow them to be more easily aroused (VP11P13). This understanding of ourselves and our affections, bringing together intellect, imagination and emotion, takes the mind directly into the dramatic high point of the Ethics: the intellectual love of God, in which the passion of sadness must give way to the affect of joy.

Chapter 4
Intuitive knowledge and the intellectual love of God

The recognition of a form of knowledge superior to reason throws into relief the distinctive character of Spinoza’s rationalism. But it is important to see that Spinoza’s intuitive knowledge is not a radically different path to knowledge; it can only be reached through reason. In his definition of intuitive knowledge in Part Two Spinoza stresses its immediacy—
its capacity to take things in, as it were, in ‘one glance’ (IIP40S2). But it does not bypass the rigours of rational thought. Only the mind capable of understanding the general principles of things can have this kind of immediate insight into how things must be.

Intuition understands things in relation to God. It ‘proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the (formal) essence of things’ (IIP40S2). But that does not mean that it has access to a transcendent realm beyond the reach of reason. Intuitive knowledge is not a form of non-rational mystical insight into the real natures of things. Spinoza nonetheless does talk of it in terms that deliberately echo the language of traditional theological concepts of faith. Intuitive knowledge is clearly meant to conjure up continuities with older beliefs in the power of a divine presence in human life and in a human capacity to transcend the frailty and vulnerability of bodily existence.

Spinoza’s version of reason has closer ties with emotion than we might expect in a rationalist philosophy. In the third form of knowledge, these ties become more immediate. Intuitive knowledge leads inevitably into the intellectual love of God, which is for Spinoza the most powerful and most stable form of joy. The nature of intuitive knowledge—and its ramifications for human life in relation both to time and to eternity—emerge more clearly if we approach it through these connections with love and joy.

Spinoza’s treatment of love in Part Three has already prepared us for the dramatic denouement of the Ethics: the attaining of freedom and ‘blessedness’ through an acquiescence in necessity. Spinoza now describes the mind’s transition to understanding itself as eternal. The mind ‘becomes eternal’ in realising its own status as finite mode of substance—a truth which has been there all along. For Spinoza, as we have seen, the crucial aspect of love is the contentment the mind finds in the idea of the cause of its joy—‘a satisfaction in the lover on account of the presence of the thing loved’ (DefAffVIExp). This satisfaction in the understanding of its own joy takes priority over the union with the loved object which earlier definitions—wrongly, in Spinoza’s view—presented as the essence of love. In the lack of a role for the will in establishing union with the loved object, this union amounts to nothing more than the intellectual recognition of the cause of our joy. Spinoza now builds on that transformation of the concept of love, presenting his highest form of knowledge as yielding a clearer understanding of ourselves and our affects—an understanding which cannot be separated from the highest form of love.

The ‘intellectual love of God’, as Wolfson notes, is a familiar expression in the philosophical tradition—as common as ‘substance’ (Wolfson 1934: II, 306). Spinoza could have taken it from various sources. What is striking about his version is the closeness of the connection between cognition and affect. To understand things in relation to the idea of God is to love God. For to bring the idea of a thing into relation to the idea of God is just to form a clear and distinct concept of it—to see it truly as a mode of substance. This clear cognition, since it involves the mind’s transition to greater activity, is necessarily joyful. Love is, by
definition, joy accompanied by the idea of its cause. So to understand ourselves and our affects in relation to God is to experience a love of God (VP15D).

Here once more we see intellect, emotion and imagination draw together. Images of things we understand clearly are more readily joined to other images. Images flourish in association with clear and distinct perception and so too does emotion. To bring ideas into relation to substance, whose modes they are, yields the intellectual love of God. It is an affect that can be joined to all our bodily affections, engaging the mind more than other affects (VP16). But becoming a mind predominantly engaged by the intellectual love of God is not a transformation into a state utterly different from that of bondage to passion. It is rather a shift in the relations between the ideas which make up the mind as idea of the body—in the proportion of adequate over inadequate ideas, and hence of activity over passivity. We now see the most dramatic aspect of this shift in which all stays the same while yet, from the standpoint of the individual mind, a crucial transformation occurs. The intellectual love of God, which the mind reaches through the exercise of intuitive knowledge, is one and the same as the love by which God eternally loves himself. This identity, as we shall see, is the key to the extraordinary doctrine of the mind’s eternity. But first let us look a little more closely at the state of intellectual love of God from the perspective of the mind striving better to understand itself as the idea of an actually existing body. This is the intellectual love of God as it concerns ‘this present life’ in Spinoza’s phrase (VP20S).

Many commentators see Spinoza’s intellectual love of God as an esoteric, inaccessible state of mind which remains totally obscure in Spinoza’s brief treatment of it. The doctrine of the eternity of the mind, which emerges from the intellectual love of God, is accordingly frequently dismissed as incoherent or at best impenetrable. Jonathan Bennett excuses himself from engaging with the details of these sections of the Ethics on the grounds that at this point ‘the burden of error and confusion has become unbearable’ (Bennett 1984:370). Spinoza, he suggests, is here writing in so lax and slippery a fashion as to defeat reasonable conjecture about his views. The concluding sections of the Ethics, Bennett thinks, are unsalvageable. ‘After three centuries of failure to profit from it, the time has come to admit that this part of the Ethics has nothing to teach us and is pretty certainly worthless’ (Bennett 1984:372).

Where some see an impenetrable aspiration to profundity, others see a reversion to familiar inanities. Wolfson, in summing up the implications of Spinoza’s treatment of the intellectual love of God, comments that his ‘sovereign remedy for the ailments of the soul’ is really nothing but the old consolation held out to its faithful by every religion: the advice to relate everything to the idea of God, casting our burdens upon him (Wolfson 1934: II, 273-4). It may seem strange, Wolfson notes, to find Spinoza’s philosophy, having so vehemently rejected the traditional God, now ending in the ‘same old mystic circle, the refuge in God’. In defence of Spinoza, Wolfson suggests that perhaps he had no intention of showing the ‘consolation’ of his own philosophy to be greater than that of the old religion. His aim, rather, was to show that in denying the elements of personality traditionally attributed to the God of the theologians he was not disqualifying his own version of God from being a force and a power for goodness. Spinoza’s intent here, according to Wolfson, is to show the power of his depersonalised God in human life. But is this interpretation coherent? Does it make sense to cast our burdens on, or trust to, a depersonalised God?
The upshot of Spinoza’s version of understanding things in relation to the idea of God seems in fact to be quite different from that of traditional religion. There is nothing ultimately mysterious or inaccessible about the kind of understanding involved in this intuitive knowledge. The acquiescence associated with his intellectual love of God is quite different from that involved in trusting to the purposes of a personalised deity. It is not a matter of trusting that everything happens for the best; and, although it involves understanding the causes of sadness, it is not a dour acceptance of what is given us by God to endure. Sadness, rather than being accepted through under-

standing, is transformed by it. ‘Insofar as we understand the causes of sadness, it ceases (by P3) to be a passion, that is (by IIP59), to that extent it ceases to be sadness. And so, insofar as we understand God to be the cause of sadness, we rejoice’ (VP18S). Nor does it make sense to strive that Spinoza’s God should love us. ‘He who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return’ (VP19). To desire that God should love us would be to desire that God, the object of our love, cease to be God, which would be a source not of joy but of sadness (VP19D). A perfect being cannot undergo the transitions to greater activity in which joy and love consist. Because he passes to neither greater nor less perfection, God is strictly not affected with any affect of joy or sadness. He neither loves nor hates anyone (VP17C).

Spinoza’s depersonalised God can play nothing of the traditional role of God in looking after us, or even in loving us. What then is the intellectual content of this love? It is the same truth as the one fundamental to the whole work, for which Spinoza argued in the early sections: the dependence of finite modes on substance. The content of Spinoza’s intuitive knowledge is nothing but the general truth, grasped by reason in the early sections of the Ethics: that all our bodily affections depend on God or substance. But intuitive knowledge has an immediacy and power which reason lacks. In Part One, we were supposed to grasp the true status of finite modes as an abstract principle, derived from axioms and definitions. We now see this fundamental truth inform our ordinary experience, so that we come to understand ourselves and our affects in relation to the idea of God.

To understand in this way the truth of our dependence on substance is inevitably to be deeply affected by it. The God on whom we depend is here not an elusive first cause but rather the truth we grasp in being aware of anything as actually existing—a reflective awareness of something very familiar. Spinoza has stressed earlier that the understanding of God is in fact readily accessible to us, although we confuse the issue by projecting on to the concept of God what does not properly belong to it. God’s infinite essence and his eternity, he says, are known to all (IIP47S). And since all things are in God and conceived through God, it follows that we can move from this knowledge of God to the third kind of knowledge. But because we cannot imagine God, as we can bodies, we mistakenly join the images of other things to the name ‘God’. The imagination can foist on us a distorted conception of God, blocking access to the highest kind of knowledge. But when we have seen through its illusions, the imagination can lead us into intuitive knowledge. Flourishing images, assisted by clear and distinct understanding, form lively connections with other images, allowing us to bring it about that all the body’s affections are related to the idea of God.
Although the language in which Spinoza describes the intellectual love of God echoes, as Wolfson suggests, the language of traditional theological trust in God, this trust is no longer a matter of accepting what we do not understand, or giving ourselves over to the supposed love of a transcendent being whose purposes remain inaccessible. There is no question of Spinoza’s God loving us. The force of this love of God in human life comes precisely from its being grounded in the understanding of whatever happens to be the case—of whatever bodily affections we undergo. Because there is no affect which is ‘directly contrary’ to it, it is more stable than other loves. Indeed, insofar as it is related to the body, it cannot be destroyed unless it is destroyed with the body itself (VP20S). The full implications of this love, however, emerge only when we consider it in relation not to the body but to the mind: the intellectual love of God, properly understood, is nothing less than the mind’s recognition of itself as eternal.

The eternity of the mind

Spinoza’s version of the eternity of the mind emerges from consideration of the nature of the intellectual love of God insofar as it is ‘related only to the mind’ (V20S). This consideration of what pertains to the mind ‘without relation to the body’ takes us into the most profound—and the most difficult—sections of the Ethics. But can Spinoza talk coherently at all of the mind without relation to the body? If the mind is nothing but the idea of the body, how could it exist without the body?

In his earlier discussion of the affects, as we have seen, Spinoza has already invoked a distinction between considering them in relation to the mind alone, and in relation to ‘mind and body together’. One and the same ‘striving’ when it is related only to the mind is ‘will’; when it is related to mind and body together, it is ‘appetite’ (IIIP9S). And in introducing his ‘General Definition of the Affects’, at the end of Part III, he says that he will define the affects ‘insofar as they are related only to the mind’ (DefAffXLVIIIExp). There he could be seen as consciously prescinding from aspects of mind’s relation with body which were never really in question. Some passages in the concluding sections of Part Five can be read in the spirit of these earlier exercises in prescinding from a body whose existence is not in doubt—attending, while the body still exists, to the mind side of the mind-body, idea-object relation. We might say that such acts of prescinding or abstracting—like all other intellectual acts—could still be seen as occurring only while the body endures.

Since memory and imagination are awareness of bodily states, it is not surprising that Spinoza should say that the mind can neither imagine nor recollect except while the body endures. But he goes further, insisting also that we can attribute to mind no present existence or duration, except while the body exists. As early as IIIP11S, he stresses that not only the mind’s power of imagining but also its ‘present existence’ are taken away when the body ceases to exist; and this denial that the mind has present existence or ‘duration’ when the body does not exist is reiterated throughout Part Five. During life, we can consider mind in ways that prescind from the present existence of the body—and hence presumably also in ways that prescind from the body’s continued existence into a future. Such consideration of mind without body can occur only while the body in fact exists. At least in some passages in the concluding sections of Part Five, however, Spinoza seems to entertain a very different way of considering the mind without relation to the body. He seems seriously to consider the possibility that the mind might have a form of being that ‘remains’ beyond the existence of body. Our confusion
grows when we find that he in fact affirms this even in those very passages where he insists that the mind endures only while the body does so. ‘The human mind’, he says at VP23, ‘cannot be absolutely destroyed with

the body, but something of it remains which is eternal.’ Yet, in the ensuing demonstration of this claim that something of the mind ‘remains’ which is eternal, he insists that we can attribute duration to the mind only while the body endures. Spinoza happily juxtaposes these at first sight contradictory ways of thinking of the mind. How is the apparent contradiction to be resolved?

To unravel Spinoza’s version of the mind’s eternity it is important to take very seriously his reiterated denials that the mind’s eternity involves its continuing to ‘endure’. The mind’s existence, construed as ‘duration’, ceases with bodily death. Yet, he insists equally strongly, we ‘feel and know by experience that we are eternal’ by the ‘eyes of the mind’ which are ‘the demonstrations themselves’ (VP23S). It would seem that Spinoza thinks it is only during life that we can think of ourselves as eternal. At other times, we could not think at all. Is he then committed to saying that we can think only falsely of ourselves as eternal—that the belief in our eternity is just a powerful illusion? Tempting though such a resolution of the apparent tensions in these difficult concluding passages may be, I think it is clear that Spinoza does not think of himself as describing an illusion. The mind’s understanding of itself as eternal is presented as the climax of the work, the highest achievement of ‘blessedness’. In perceiving ourselves as eternal, we perceive ourselves truly. The illusion arises only when we think of this eternity in terms of continued duration after the body has ceased to exist. Our thought of ourselves as eternal is not only a deep conviction but a true one—an authoritative intellectual perception whose credentials are manifested by the perception itself. There are strong echoes here of Spinoza’s earlier descriptions of intuitive knowledge at IIP40S: here we simply ‘see’ how things must be.

If it is an illusion to give content to this immediate perception in terms of duration, how then are we to articulate it? It is helpful here to focus on how the perception of ourselves as eternal could allay—as Spinoza claims it does—the fear of death. Death becomes less harmful to us the more the mind loves God (VP38S). Perceiving ourselves as eternal is supposed not only to reconcile us to mortality but to make us no longer fear death. If to understand ourselves as eternal is not to expect immortality, we may wonder how it could remove our fear of death. But perhaps it is not so much the content of the perception as rather the quality of the perceiving itself—its affective and imaginative power—that overcomes the debilitating fear of death. It may help here to think of a more recent way in which the issue of immortality has come into present-day consciousness: the much publicised phenomenon of ‘near-death experiences’, which are often accompanied by a reported loss of the fear of death. The acquiescence in mortality that follows such an experience can of course sometimes be explained in terms of a new-found conviction that death is not final. Not all articulations of the experience, however, involve such a belief in continued existence beyond death. In some cases the experience is articulated as bringing, not the conviction of immortality, but rather the conviction that the undoubted finality of death no longer matters: mortality no longer intrudes on the untroubled enjoyment of the present.
Spinoza’s version of the eternity of the mind can similarly be taken in two ways. On the first reading, to ‘feel and know by experience’ that we are eternal is to glimpse a continued existence beyond death, though one which no longer involves memory, imagination or—more paradoxically—duration. On the second, the perception of eternity is a perception of the unimportance of death—of its powerlessness really to intrude on the present. On the first reading, the fear of death recedes because death is seen as having ultimately no power to destroy us. On the second, the fear of death recedes because its undeniable power to destroy us is seen as powerless to intrude on the present joy in which the duration of the mind, fully understood, consists.

The idea that the finality of death need be a source neither of fear nor of diminished enjoyment of life is familiar from ancient Epicureanism. There are echoes in the *Ethics* of the Epicurean affirmation of the present, which draws its strength from the denial of immortality. But there are differences too. ‘That most frightful of evils, death, is nothing to us’, says Epicurus, ‘seeing that when we exist death is not present, and when death is present we do not exist’ (Long and Sedley 1987:50). For Epicurus, we do not lose the fear of death by denying its power to destroy us. Rather, clearly understanding the destructive power of death rids us of the desire to live forever. We do not escape the fear of death by ‘adding infinite time’ but by freeing ourselves of the desire for immortality. Through understanding the finality of death, we are released to the enjoyment of life. There is nothing fearful in living, he says, for one who genuinely grasps that there is nothing fearful in not living. Out of the very perception of our mortality comes the reconciliation to it; and in this reconciliation there is no suggestion of a continuation of existence in some higher form. It is precisely because death is final that it is ‘nothing to us’. The understanding of mortality thus brings its own remedy for the debilitating fear of death. We fear death only from a lingering expectation of an afterlife whose form remains unknown.

There are echoes of Epicurus in Spinoza’s insistent rejection of all duration or continued existence of the mind after the death of the body. But although they both repudiate the belief in immortality there is in the Epicurean doctrine no equivalent of Spinoza’s insistence that the mind is nonetheless eternal. Spinoza wants to treat the mind as having a genuine eternity which is misconstrued as immortality. The greatest challenge in interpreting these difficult but fascinating concluding sections of the work is to see how Spinoza’s way of bringing together time and eternity is supposed to yield a more coherent version of the reconciliation which we glimpse through the distorting fiction of immortality—to see how understanding ourselves as eternal reconciles us during life to mortality.

We must return to Spinoza’s treatment of self-consciousness for clarification of his initially mystifying doctrine of the mind’s eternity. Some commentaries on these sections of the *Ethics* see Spinoza as constructing a notion of the self which can transcend the border between life and death. A Spinozistic self must be an idea of a body but the content of that idea—for this interpretation—must not be confined to what pertains to a body existing in time. Alan Donagan has offered one of the most cogent versions of this kind of interpretation, centred on an elaboration of the implications of Spinoza’s treatment of the essence of the individual body (Donagan 1988:198-200). In God, Donagan points out, there are ideas expressing the essences of all the individual human bodies that have been, are, or will be. The mind of Hannibal endures for a time only insofar as it
is the idea of his actually existing body. But the idea of the essence of Hannibal’s body, which
is necessarily in God, belongs to the essence of Hannibal’s mind. Unlike Hannibal’s idea of
his actually existing body, this idea of the essence of his body is eternal. So something
belonging to the essence of Hannibal’s mind is eternal. Of course, Donagan notes, there are
restrictions on what is included in this essence. So far as Hannibal’s idea of the eternal
essence of his body involves the lower kinds of knowledge it is in God’s mind, not sub specie
aeternitatis, but only insofar as it constitutes the idea of Hannibal’s body actually existing in
the present. But so far as Hannibal’s idea of the essence of his body is made up of common
notions—of ideas of properties common to his body and the external things that affect it—it is
sub specie aeternitatis, and so part of God’s own idea of that body.

On Donagan’s interpretation, when Hannibal died God’s mind ceased to constitute the idea of
that body as actually existing. But, so far as Hannibal’s idea of himself was adequate, it would
be part of the adequate idea of Hannibal’s essence eternally in God’s mind, and so would
remain. Donagan readily acknowledges that the eternal part of my mind is not strictly me. He
sees his interpretation as offering, nonetheless, a plausible account of Spinoza’s version of a
mind’s ‘remaining’ after death. Recognising the eternity of that portion of my mind which
consists in adequate ideas can allow me to say that something of me is and remains eternal at
times before and after the actual existence of my body.

There is something strange about the transitions evoked by Donagan from the eternal idea of
the essence of a possible body into the period of duration of the same body as actually
existent; and on into the eternal idea of essence once more. To tell the story as Donagan does,
we need to mix talk of existing-at-times and of eternity in a way that seems at odds with
Spinoza’s treatment of the relations between time and eternity. Time, as distinct from
duration, belongs with the imagination. Time arises from comparisons the mind makes
between moving bodies. Whereas duration is the very being of modes, time is a subjective
feature of our perception. We imagine time, Spinoza says, from the fact that we imagine some
bodies to move more slowly, or more quickly, or with the same speed; and our

judgments about past and future are implicated in the vacillations of the imagination (IIP44S).

It is not clear that Spinoza can coherently say, as Donagan’s reading suggests, that the eternal
idea of the essence of my body exists before or after my body exists. It is clear nonetheless
that for Spinoza the mind’s understanding of the essence of its body does have a crucial role
in its understanding itself as eternal. The self evoked in Epicurus’s discussion of death is an
all-or-nothing affair—solidly there during life, totally absent at death. For Spinoza, in
contrast, the mind’s self-awareness during life involves, as we have already seen, a blurring of
the boundaries between its own body and the others that impinge on it. To the extent that a
mind comes to an adequate understanding of itself as an individual—that is, of the essence of
the body of which it is the idea—it must understand other things together with itself. A self
whose borders thus shift in the process of acquiring more adequate self-understanding is a self
whose relations to death and life are less clear-cut than the here-today, gone-tomorrow
Epicurean self. To the extent that the Spinozistic self understands itself during life, its being is
already bound up with that of the rest of nature, in a way that resists encapsulation into fixed
The mind, truly understood, involves other finite things which are themselves in turn understandable only in relation to yet others.

The mind’s understanding of its own essence figures also in an interesting interpretation of the eternity of the mind offered by Yirmiyahu Yovel (Yovel 1989: I, 169-71). In contrast to Donagan’s interpretation, Yovel argues that for Spinoza the eternity of the mind is reached only in the present life. Spinoza’s version of eternity, he suggests, is ‘a metaphysical state or quality’, which penetrates into present existence and is attained and realised within it. Minds die with their bodies. What ‘remains’ is ‘the eternal essence which was there all along’. The mind’s eternal particular essence exists regardless of time, as it did even before my birth. ‘It is therefore not in immortality that metaphysical salvation consists, but in the realization of eternity within time.’ Like Donagan, Yovel stresses that this essence is not me. But during life—and only during life—this timeless essence can become part of my actual, enduring mind; and it is in this that Spinoza’s version of ‘salvation’ consists. With regard to times before and after the existence of my body, there is no ‘blessedness’ or ‘salvation’, because there is at those times nothing eternal that can be identified with me. Yovel is right to ‘shift the focus to how the mind perceives itself during life. But if my eternal essence is not identified with me, except while my body endures, how does understanding it provide any solace during life for my inevitable mortality? If my ‘eternal essence’ is not me, why should its being eternal affect me at all?

Let us now try another approach to the eternity of the mind, bringing it into more explicit connection with Spinoza’s highest form of knowledge, from which it is supposed to arise. We are now perhaps in a position to see what it is about the highest form of knowledge that carries the perception of the mind’s eternity. The understanding of a finite thing through intuitive knowledge of course cannot involve understanding all other things in their specificity; otherwise the highest form of knowledge would be inaccessible. Since a human mind is the idea of an individual body, there is no way it can totally transcend its limited position in the whole to understand all things adequately. A mind is directly aware of the particular affections of its own body; but it cannot grasp in their detail the mediation of forces throughout the totality which gives rise to those affections. What we can do through intuitive knowledge is understand with respect to individual finite things—and especially with respect to our selves—the truth of our own status as mode of substance. Why should such understanding overcome the fear of death? Mere knowledge of the abstract truth of the dependence of finite modes on substance—as grasped through reason—does not of itself yield the state of blessedness in which the fear of death recedes. But to expect some new, additional content for intuitive knowledge is to look in the wrong direction. What is new is the understanding of the truth of finite modes in relation to particular bodily modifications, and to ourselves as ideas of those modifications.

The self-understanding that arises from intuitive knowledge involves awareness of the actual existence of those affections, rather than a Platonic ascent into the realm of universals. But this focus on actual existence is just what we should expect from Spinoza’s version of the understanding of essences. We saw him insist earlier that, where
the essence of a finite thing is given, so too is the thing itself. Spinoza’s essences are not Platonic universals. For Spinoza, to understand the dependence of the essence of a finite thing on God is a way of understanding the thing’s actual existence. However, this is a different way of understanding a thing as actual from that involved in understanding it in relation to other finite things through which its existence is mediated—understanding it, as he puts it, ‘in relation to a certain time and place’ (VP29S). Spinoza’s contrast at VP29 between understanding the body’s essence ‘under a species of eternity’ and understanding its ‘present actual existence’ may sound like a Platonic ascent to universals. But his clarification of the point in the Scholium should alert us to what is misleading in such an interpretation. What is distinctive about the intuitive grasp of essences is not that it turns away from the actual existence of finite things, but rather that it involves a special way of understanding actual existence. Intuitive knowledge does not understand the essences of finite things as being really non-durational. Rather, it understands the real nature of their duration—that is, of their dependence on substance. It is this that Spinoza contrasts with mere understanding of things ‘in relation to a certain time and place’.

In the opening definitions of Part One, Spinoza defined eternity in terms of the existence of substance (ID8); and in the opening definitions of Part Two, he defined duration as ‘an indefinite continuation of existing’ (IID4). Eternity and duration are defined in terms of the being of substance and that of modes respectively. Time and eternity cannot be reduced to, or constructed out of, one another—any more than that can be done with substance and mode. But properly to understand duration is to understand the kind of existence that modes have; and that is to understand them in relation to substance. To understand duration is to see, beyond the present existence of a mode, the dependence on substance which is the source of its existence. Here present existence does not fall away as unreal, to be replaced by some higher kind of being. Rather, in understanding ourselves as eternal, we understand the nature of our present existence—our status as modes of substance. We know that we are in God and are conceived through God; we understand ourselves through God’s essence as involving existence (VP30 and D). The

more we understand in this way, the more we are conscious of ourselves and of God and hence the more ‘perfect and blessed’ we are (VP31S).

The self-knowledge of the ‘blessed’

In knowing ourselves as eternal, we know something already true. All minds are eternal, but not all know themselves to be so. This suggests that there is more to self-knowledge than being a presently existing idea of a presently existing body. Despite Spinoza’s insistence that the order and connection of ideas corresponds to that of things, there seems to be, as it were, an ‘excess’ of mind over body. The Spinozistic self, as we have seen, reaches beyond strict bodily borders, appropriating to itself an ever richer understanding of the modifications of which it is directly aware in the lower kinds of knowledge. The self expands from the narrow confines of immediate awareness of bodily modification to a grasp of what those modifications have in common with others. When a mind moves from reason to intuitive knowledge what happens is not an expansion of this circle of self-awareness to encompass the whole. No self could achieve the impossible feat of thus making all its ideas adequate, while yet remaining an individual. But the self that reaches blessedness does come to grasp in a new
way—not accessible through reason alone—the full force of the truth of its being a mode of substance.

In knowing ourselves as eternal, we know ourselves truly. But how are we to reconcile that with thinking of ourselves as having begun to exist or expecting that we will cease to do so? It is tempting in considering these issues to project the self forward into a continuing existence beyond bodily death, even if we have no inclination to project our selves back to a time we cannot remember before the body began to exist. But we are now in a position to see that, if we take seriously Spinoza’s way of thinking of the relations between time and eternity, this projection is a misleading way of taking his talk of the mind’s eternity. To think of a mind’s continued existence—either before or after the existence of the body—as a zone of eternity, encompassing the limited period of duration, is to confuse eternity with duration. Indeed Spinoza suggests, at VP31S, that it is not strictly true to think of the mind as ‘beginning to be’ or even as ‘beginning to understand things under a species of eternity’. These are ways of thinking we take on ‘for an easier explanation and better understanding of the things we wish to show’. We may do this, he says, ‘without danger of error’, provided we are careful to ‘draw our conclusions only from evident premises’.

Of course if we do ‘draw our conclusions only from evident premises’—rigorously abiding by the second form of knowledge—what we think must be true. There is no such immunity from error in the lesser forms of knowledge. Spinoza’s point is that the fiction does no harm provided we do not let it figure in our drawing of conclusions—provided, that is, that we use it only to get a grip on what the issue is, not to come to a firm understanding of it. Once we have used it in this way, we can then see it as an aid to the imagination, rather than a substantive part of the truth—a harmless exercise provided we are careful to distinguish between the operations of imagination and those of reason. Spinoza intriguingly invites us to join him in enacting a fiction. The mind has in fact had eternally the perfection which we are now to ‘feign’ has just come to it. We are to ‘feign’ that the mind begins to know itself with the third kind of knowledge (VP33S). But, once we know that we are eternal, we in fact know that we have eternally been so; indeed, it seems, we know that we have eternally known ourselves to be so. What Spinoza is saying is that here the idea of a ‘beginning’ has no place. The mind does not really pass from a state of unknown eternal being into a state of recognition of its own eternity. For what makes it eternal is precisely the knowledge of its own eternity. So, if it is indeed eternal, there can be no beginning of its knowing this. Such an entry into a supposed higher kind of knowledge must be itself a fiction—a ‘feigning’.

Resort to this fiction allows the mind to bridge the gap between its understanding of its essence under the form of eternity and its understanding of itself as durational—in relation to a certain time and place. Diane Steinberg has argued that Spinoza ‘all but severed the tie between one part of the mind—intellect—and the body, and between the two parts of the mind’. Spinoza, she suggests, revised his conception of the mind in Part Five, coming to hold that it
consisted of two parts: the idea of an actually existing body, and the idea of the essence of the body under the form of eternity, which is ‘virtually independent of the body’ (Steinberg 1981:67-8). Steinberg sees this ‘revision’ as motivated by Spinoza’s recognition of his inability otherwise to account for the mind’s ability to have adequate knowledge without abandoning the correspondence between the order of thought and that of things. ‘Spinoza is unable to give an account of the ability of the mind to engage in adequate thinking, for there can be no physical process which corresponds to the mental function of adequate thought’ (Steinberg 1981:53). It was ‘a certain deficiency’ in his conception of the mind as the idea of an actually existing body, she thinks, which led Spinoza to his theory that a part of the mind must be eternal. Such a reading, however, removes the appearance of an inconsistency in Spinoza’s theory of mind only at the cost of undermining the unified structure of the Ethics and making incoherent Spinoza’s story of the mind’s self-transformation. The eternal part of the mind is no longer in the same realm as that where struggle for blessedness takes place.

On Spinoza’s new theory there can be no tension in the mind between the two parts, no struggle for dominion on the part of one or the other, for there simply cannot be any effect of one part on the other.

(Steinberg 1981:67)

We do not need to postulate a ‘struggle’ between two parts of the mind to make sense of Spinoza’s story. Nor do we need any causal relations between eternity and time, other than those involved in the relations between substance and its modes. The mind shifts between two ways of understanding itself in relation to substance: one involves understanding itself as eternal, the other involves understanding itself as durational—in relation to a certain time and place. There is no contradiction here—no rejection of one theory of mind in favour of another. But to glimpse the truth of its dual status, the mind resorts to the ‘fiction’ of eternity as a state to be attained. Intellect summons up the resources of the philosophical imagination. If we opt for this kind of reading of Spinoza’s version of the eternity of the mind—which saves the unity of the work—are we left, as Steinberg implies,

with an unresolved difficulty in his affirmation of the parallelism between the modes of thought and of matter? Steinberg’s puzzlement about what exactly corresponds, among modes of extension, to adequate acts of thinking is understandable; and we may think that Spinoza’s brief treatment of the physics of bodies in Part Two is inadequate to provide a satisfactory resolution of the problem. But to see, in Spinoza’s subtle drawing together of intuitive knowledge and the intellectual love of God in the second half of Part Five, nothing more than a last-ditch attempt to resolve a supposed inconsistency in his theory of mind, left hanging since Part Two, is to set aside the argumentative structure of the text and, especially, its synthesis of metaphysical and ethical concerns.

These bewildering sections are important for Spinoza. It may seem paradoxical to claim that the mind’s recognition of itself as eternal is the source of its being so. But the claim makes more sense against the background of Spinoza’s demonstration, in Part Two, of the inherently reflexive character of the higher forms of knowledge. ‘He who has a true idea at the same time knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing’ (IIP43). If the mind’s full understanding of itself involves understanding itself as eternal, that understanding must necessarily accompany all true self-understanding. But there are further depths to this
self-understanding: to understand ourselves as eternal is to understand that all ideas of beginning or ceasing are here out of place. The point is not that the mind must be thought of as always existing. Rather, in thinking of itself as eternal, the mind thinks of itself in a way that cannot be understood in terms of existing at a time. Hence Spinoza’s resort here to talk of feigning.

The central insight of the Ethics is that the modal status of individuals, properly understood, implies the eternity of the mind. It is striking that the transition to the highest kind of knowledge should turn out to involve a fiction. Imagination here comes to the aid of intellect; and Spinoza has no hesitation about accepting its assistance. The mind which has read the Ethics with understanding sees itself as having made a transition to the highest kind of knowledge. There is of course a non-fictional transition here, from inadequate to adequate ideas—a transition which is for Spinoza, after all, a source of real joy. But the mind which understands the highest form of knowledge as the intellectual love of God recognises its transition to that love as itself a fiction—a feigned transition into a ‘love towards God’ which in truth ‘has had no beginning’ (VP33S).

In the highest kind of knowledge intellect and imagination thus come together; but there is also a rapprochement between intellect and emotion. This kind of knowledge, as we have seen, necessarily takes the form of love—a love which, unlike others, is eternal. The interconnections between affects and imagination ensure that other kinds of love are tied to the present constitution of the body, and hence to duration—to the continuation of ‘present existence’. This love, in contrast, must be eternal. Here all beginnings are ‘feigned’.

Astute readers of the Ethics, having struggled to gain the required understanding of themselves as eternal, may be surprised to be told that this state of consciousness really has no beginning. Did they already have it before the labour of reading Spinoza? And what of the minds that never struggle to the highest kind of knowledge? Is the eternal intellectual love of God present even in the minds of those who never make the effort? ‘If we attend to the common opinion of men,’ Spinoza tells us, ‘we shall see that they are indeed conscious of the eternity of their mind, but that they confuse it with duration, and attribute it to the imagination, or memory, which they believe remains after death’ (P34S). The difference between the multitude and the enlightened here is not that the latter are conscious of the eternity of their minds, while the former lack this consciousness. The difference is that the unwise have the knowledge in a form which is distorted by its assimilation to the lowest forms of knowledge. They think of their eternity as a never-ending existence—an immortality of imagination and memory. The wise, in contrast, understand that their eternity is not at all a matter of beginnings or ends—except insofar as such transitions are feigned. Such exercises of imagination in feigning—unlike those in which the multitude engage—do not distort the truth. Feigning is a point of access to truth, allowing us to glimpse it without danger of error, as long as we treat it as an aid to—rather than as a substitute for—the evident premises and firm conclusions of reason.

What then, finally, are we to make of the self-knowledge that arises from intuitive knowledge? What is the difference between the mind considered as presently existing and the
mind considered as eternal? If it is not a continuing ‘present existence’ what is it? The crucial point comes at VP36. It depends on the close relation between intuitive knowledge and the intellectual love of God. God’s ‘love’ of us and our intellectual love of God, Spinoza insists, are one and the same (VP36C). As we have already seen, Spinoza regards the idea of God’s love—in a being that in fact undergoes no transitions—as something we feign. And the ‘beginning’ of our intellectual love of God is also a fiction. But he does not hesitate to juxtapose such fictions with the truths gained from reason. Our ‘salvation or blessedness, or freedom’ consists in a ‘constant and eternal love of God, or in God’s love for men’. There can be no beginnings in this love; for it is really just God’s eternal love of himself. But there is a shift of focus—the love is now considered from the standpoint of the mind as an individual finite mode, rather than that of God.

Nothing can take away from us the intellectual love of God. For it amounts to the truth of the relations between modes and substance. The truth of this dependence, however, affects our minds more deeply when it is understood through intuitive knowledge, in relation to the essence of a singular thing, than when it is grasped through reason as a general truth about modes. There is no inconsistency here—as Spinoza stresses at VP37S—with the crucial Axiom of Part Four, that there is in nature nothing that can resist ultimate destruction. For the Axiom concerns singular things insofar as they are considered in the alternative way in which things can be conceived as actual—‘in relation to a certain time and place’—rather than the understanding of things in relation to God. Just as the mind can bring it about that the greater proportions of its ideas are adequate, so too—and by the same process—it can bring it about that its greater part is eternal. The part of the mind given over to inadequate ideas—the part which perishes with the body—will then come to be ‘of no moment’ in relation to what ‘remains’. There are interesting continuities here with Spinoza’s discussions of personal identity and of suicide. Earlier, he has offered an account of death as change in the disposition of the parts of the body so that they acquire a different proportion of motion and rest to one another (IVP39S). No reason compels him, he says there, to maintain that the body does not die unless it is changed into a corpse: we might also think of the body as having ‘died’, where it has changed into another nature entirely different from its own—where it has undergone metamorphosis, as it were, rather than annihilation. The Spanish poet who forgets his past literary works might well be appropriately seen as not ‘the same man’; and if such a man forgot even his own language, we might think of him not as a man at all but as a ‘grown-up infant’. Even our own infancy, he continues, can seem so remote from what we now identify as ourselves that we have difficulty in believing that we ever were infants, unless we were able to observe the continuity between infancy and adulthood in other people. Rather than providing ‘the superstitious’ with material for raising new questions, Spinoza prefers, he says, to leave the discussion unfinished. But the subsequent discussion of the eternity of the mind evokes again the reflections of these earlier sections. To the extent that the mind ‘comes’ to be eternal—to the extent, that is, that the greater proportion of our ideas are understood sub specie aeternitatis—the mind is not what it was. But such a ‘dying’ may now make merely turning into a corpse seem of little consequence.

Inadequate ideas are constitutive of the individual identity of the mind: the Spinozistic mind could transform all its inadequate ideas into adequate ones only at the cost of ceasing to exist. Because the mind is part of nature, it cannot render all its ideas adequate, any more than it can
render itself invulnerable to dying, in all its forms. Jonathan Rée has suggested that it follows from Spinoza’s theory of knowledge that ‘as we educate ourselves in physics or metaphysics, our identity with a particular personal body gets dispersed’ (Rée 1988:53). A mind may leave its old body behind as its mental power increases—soaring to a higher identity with God or nature. Can such flight into a new identity be reconciled with Spinoza’s insistence on the correlation between mind and body? In separating dying from the idea of annihilation, Spinoza exploits the resources of his version of selfhood for a more flexible understanding of issues of identity. The identity of the poet changes as the scope of his memory and imagination contracts; and, at the other end of the spectrum of

consciousness, the mind whose greater part is eternal finds bodily annihilation as of no moment. Once a mind knows that there can be no change in its intellectual love of God, it ceases to regard dying as of any consequence. What it understands as itself has already ceased to be predominantly bound up with ‘perishable’ memory and imagination. God’s ‘love’ of himself, ‘insofar as he can be explained by the human mind’s essence’ (VP36), cannot be affected by anything durational. But here again we should be wary of giving this too Platonic an interpretation. Becoming eternal is not a matter of transcending memory and imagination to soar off into a realm of imperishable essences. Nor is it a transcending of body. It is just a matter of fully understanding the individuality of finite modes. Spinoza stresses again in these concluding sections the importance of bodily affections in the highest kind of knowledge. The mind that comes to know itself as eternal does, it is true, come to regard whatever is related only to its memory or imagination as of ‘hardly any moment’. But Spinoza also insists that the mind most conscious of ‘itself, of God and of things’ is the idea of a body capable of a great many things (VP39S).

Despite Spinoza’s stress on the contrast between present existence and eternity, his concept of blessedness is, as Yovel stresses, strongly centred on the present life. In keeping with his earlier treatment of virtue as residing in the pursuit of self-preservation—rather than in the attaining of some goal for which self-preservation is a prerequisite—Spinoza insists in the concluding sections that even if the mind were not eternal, his version of the good life would still be of the first importance. Morality is not a burden, to be taken up for the sake of happiness in an afterlife. It would be absurd to think that because we are not eternal or immortal, we should ‘prefer to be mindless, and to live without reason’ (VP41S). Having argued earlier that virtue is its own reward, he now insists that blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself. To understand ourselves as eternal—as distinct from knowing it without understanding—is to be ‘hardly troubled in spirit’. It is to be ‘by a certain eternal necessity’ conscious of ourselves, of God and of things. But this state, although we must feign that it is reached during life, involves the perception of what knows neither beginning nor ceasing. The wise mind ‘always

possesses true peace of mind’ (VP42S). But, strengthening and reassuring though this perception may be, Spinoza also sees that no mind is always wise. Nor does our precarious wisdom cancel out the truth that minds, like all things, are vulnerable to being overcome by external causes and will ultimately cease to exist.
We have now seen that Spinoza’s version of the mind’s eternity involves bringing together his insight into the fluidity of selfhood with his insight into the nature of duration as nothing more nor less than the existence of finite modes. To understand his version of the eternity of the mind, we must see both his radical separation of eternity and duration and the ways in which they come into intimate connection. We have seen that Spinoza’s treatment of the relations between time, duration and eternity makes it difficult to think of his concept of eternity in terms of existence at all times. Eternity cannot be defined in terms of duration or time ‘even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end’ (ID8Exp). Eternity and duration are for Spinoza mapped on to the radical distinction between the being of substance and that of modes. But the nature of the relation between modes and substance is such that, although these are irreducibly different kinds of being, the difference can only be explained by invoking substance in the definition of modes. To be a mode is, by definition, to be dependent on substance; and to understand ourselves as eternal is to understand ourselves as modes of an eternal substance. To understand ourselves truly is to understand ourselves in relation to substance, which is eternal. We are not—and can never be—substance. But we cannot fully understand ourselves without reference to substance, whose modes we are. In the full understanding of ourselves as modes of substance, thought, emotion and imagination come into a powerful synthesis which makes both dying and immortality cease to matter. When the mind gives up the illusions of the multitude, in favour of the necessary fictions of the wise, immortality becomes of no more importance than death.

Chapter 5
The way to wisdom

What makes the Ethics an ethical work? It contains no prescriptions directed to the will. Spinoza is not concerned with enunciating moral principles. Yet the work is imbued with ethical consciousness—with reflection on what makes a good life, on the dynamics of becoming a well-functioning human being. Spinoza is centrally concerned with reflecting deeply on what is involved in living well. One of the extraordinary achievements of the work is to give such clear expression to models of good living while repudiating moral norms. Spinoza presents our ethical aspirations as drawing on imaginative models which can strengthen our conatus (‘striving’). But, as with other constructs of our imagination, we must be wary of thinking of these ‘universal ideas’ as norms to which nature might ‘look’ in setting models before itself (IVPref). Spinoza’s ‘good’ is nothing more than ‘what we certainly know to be useful to us’ (IVD1). Yet our striving for it does not express a narrow utilitarianism or egoism.

Deleuze, in Spinoza: A Practical Philosophy, draws a useful distinction between Spinoza’s version of ‘ethics’ and a ‘morality’ (Deleuze 1970:17-29). Despite its rejection of abstract moral values, the Ethics is passionately concerned with articulating a non-moralistic ethical consciousness. For Spinoza, he suggests, goodness is ‘a matter of dynamism, power and the composition of powers’. Spinoza is concerned with what bodies can do—with their powers, which are often not apparent (IIIP2S). Spinoza’s version of ethics, in contrast to a morality,
does not refer existence to transcendental values. Rather it explores the possibilities for strengthening the powers of bodies through composition. The ethical possibilities of life come from the possibilities of joining forces with whatever agrees with our own nature in power-strengthening unions characterised by joy. In this way, Deleuze suggests, ethics has nothing to do with morality. It is conceived rather as an ‘ethology’—as a composition of fast and slow speeds, of capacities for affecting and being affected.

That is why Spinoza calls out to us in the way he does: you do not know beforehand what good or bad you are capable of; you do not know beforehand what a body or mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination.

(Deleuze 1970:125).

How we see the ethical character of the Ethics will affect how we read it. In his concluding chapter, ‘Spinoza and Us’, Deleuze comments on the ways in which the work seems to demand an ‘affective reading’. If we take seriously the account of bodies which pervades the work, we cannot, he thinks, read it without imagination and affective engagement. The book demands a ‘double reading’—on the one hand, a systematic pursuit of the general idea and the unity of the parts; on the other, and at the same time, an ‘affective reading’, ‘without an idea of the whole, where one is carried along or set down, put in motion or at rest, shaken or calmed according to the velocity of this or that part’ (Deleuze 1970:129). Deleuze sees the two kinds of reading as coming together in Part Five. The philosopher—working through the propositions—and the non-philosopher—receiving from Spinoza an affect, an impulse—emerge as one and the same being. Here concept and affect meet.

Of course, not all commentators are sympathetic to such ideas of ‘affective readings’. Jonathan Bennett describes himself as following a reading practice which centres on a rigorous scrutiny of the plausibility of Spinoza’s arguments. Bennett’s reading practice eschews the ‘courteous deference’ which pretends that Spinoza is always or usually right, under some ‘rescuing interpretation’. We show a ‘deeper respect’ for the text, he thinks, by holding Spinoza to ‘a more demanding standard, looking to him as a teacher who can help us see things which we might not have seen for ourselves’. Judged by that ‘high standard’, as we have seen, the concluding sections of Part Five are dismissed as ‘negligible’. The material is valueless. ‘Worse, it is dangerous: it is rubbish which causes others to write rubbish.’ The errors of this section, Bennett suggests, are not committed in the ‘honourable service of a recognizably worthwhile philosophical project’ (Bennett 1984:372-4).

How we judge the second half of Part Five will be influenced by how we read the earlier parts, and especially by how we have come to think of the relations between Spinoza’s three grades of knowledge. If we think of the goal of Spinoza’s rationalism as to leave behind—as much as humanly possible—the distortions of imagination and the vagaries of emotion, in favour of a clear grasp of rational deductive structures, we may well share Bennett’s disdain for the affective resonances and mysterious ‘fictions’ of the work’s concluding sections. But if we see the grades of knowing as standing in a relation of close complementarity, rather than a hierarchical ascent, we may see here a more subtle interplay of rational demonstration, imaginative ‘feigning’ and affect. We may see Spinoza as bringing reason, emotion and imagination together in a new version of ancient ideals of wisdom.
In reading the *Ethics* we move between imagination, reason and intuitive knowledge. But although intuitive knowledge—both in its definition and in its practice—is given the final articulation of knowledge, the lower grades are never really left behind. We are led into the highest form of knowledge in Part Five by the same procedures of rigorous deductive reasoning that are given prominence in the earlier Parts. But, even in the midst of the intuitive grasp of the mind as eternal, Spinoza invites us to engage in imaginative exercises of ‘feigning’. Even in the highest reaches of knowledge, he finds appropriate uses of imagination. Provided we keep our rational wits about us, we can be confident that imaginative fictions will not lead us astray. We are to exercise philosophical imagination in order better to see how things must be. So we feign that God has affects, undergoing joy and love; and we feign that we have just begun to be eternal. The attentive reader of the *Ethics* is drawn into the fiction that he or she has begun to know with the highest kind of knowledge. Imagination, reason and intuitive knowledge interweave; and the transitions between them are interwoven also with affects of joy.

If we do think of the three grades of knowledge as hierarchically related—in a way that demands that the lower forms be shed in favour of the higher—it may seem that there is, as Jonathan Rée has suggested, something paradoxical about the rhetorical structure of the *Ethics*. In a paper taking issue with the methodological presuppositions of Bennett’s reading of Spinoza, Rée argues that Spinoza’s integration of his distinction between the three grades of knowing into the work’s rhetorical structure poses a predicament similar to that of politicians who need to negotiate with bodies whose existence they cannot afford to recognise. The work, he suggests, pictures its readers as occupying the middle portion of a ladder which stretches from the ‘untutored multitude’ beneath them to the ‘implied philosopher’ above. Readers are meant to climb the ladder of knowledge until they acquire an adequate idea of God. In theory, then, the *Ethics* should contain nothing but the best kind of knowledge, presented purely from the point of view of eternity. But the book could then make sense only to readers whose minds have nothing to gain from reading it. In practice Spinoza was obliged to admit inadequate notions into the world of the *Ethics*, if only in order to argue them out of it again (Rée 1988:48-9). But the paradox Rée sees in the structure of the work is perhaps nothing but the recurring paradox of the Spinozistic self—an idea whose very being consists in the struggle for a clarity the full attaining of which would involve the self’s own destruction.

The recognition of the paradox, rather than being a mystifying feature of the rhetorical structure of the *Ethics*, is perhaps its central insight, the beginnings of wisdom.

Wolfson sums up what is new in Spinoza’s philosophy as a succession of ‘acts of daring’ centred on the removal of breaks in the unity of nature (Wolfson 1934: II, 332-8). In declaring that God has the attribute of extension as well as that of thought, and that the human soul is inseparable from body, he removes breaks in the principle of the homogeneity of nature. And in denying design and purpose in God, and free will in human beings, he removes breaks in the principle of the uniformity of the laws of nature. Wolfson is right to emphasise the ways in which Spinoza’s reconstruction of the unity of the world as object of knowledge offers a philosophy oriented to the new science. But there is more at stake here than the seventeenth-
century dream of a unified system of knowledge. Spinoza’s philosophy involves a radical shift in the ways of thinking of the knowing subject, no less than in how we think of the objects of knowledge. It implies that there is something misleading about the model of a rationally unified world presented to an equally unified rational knowing subject. Imagination can be a source of delusion; but we delude ourselves also if we deny its role in knowledge. The self that knows is itself implicated in the illusions—if illusions they be—of the lower forms of knowledge. God may have an adequate understanding of the essence of my body in its total context; but inadequacy is integral to the complex of ideas that constitutes the individual me.

Affect and imagination, no less than reason and intuitive knowledge, make up Spinoza’s version of the self. ‘The essence of the mind is constituted by adequate and by inadequate ideas…. So it strives to persevere in its being both insofar as it has inadequate ideas and insofar as it has adequate ideas’ (IIIP9D). His version of the unity of nature opens up new possibilities for ethical consciousness, no less than for science. His philosophy sees the emergence, as Negri puts it, of ‘a fullness and a unity of the body and human reason’. In restoring the unity of nature he gives us ‘a solid and full subjectivity’. Reason unfolds in articulation and equilibrium with the body in the passage from appetite to virtue. ‘Finally we are given a whole world,


The transitions between the grades of Spinozistic knowledge are as much about attachment and detachment—about love and acquiescence—as they are about the preconditions of an adequate science; and he sees the epistemological and the ethical projects as closely related. Knowledge and love are interconnected—not just in the relations between intuitive knowledge and the intellectual love of God, but throughout the articulation of Spinoza’s theory of knowledge. His early version of intuitive knowledge in the Short Treatise (Part II, Chs 22 and 23), where he describes the soul’s transitions between objects of love, prefigures the transitions between grades of knowledge in the Ethics. In the Short Treatise version, the soul becomes united with a succession of increasingly adequate objects of love; growth in adequate knowledge involves a gradual shedding of inferior love objects in favour of more durable ones. As we come to know God, he says, we must necessarily unite with him ‘for he cannot manifest himself, or be known by us, as anything but the most magnificent and best of all’ (Curley 1985:139). Such union does not demand completely adequate knowledge. In knowing our bodies we do not know them perfectly. ‘And yet, what a union! what a love!’ (Curley 1985:139). The body is the first thing of which the soul becomes aware. But the soul cannot rest in the knowledge of body without passing over into knowledge of God on whom body depends. So knowledge and love of the body pass over into knowledge and love of God—a ‘rebirth’ for the knower. 1 The Short Treatise story of the progress to more adequate objects of love presages the Ethics account of the process by which the mind comes to recognise itself as eternal by understanding more fully its dependence on God; and the passage from vulnerability to a more stable joy is echoed in the interconnections between intuitive knowledge and the intellectual love of God.

We may of course read the Ethics without engaging with its emotional resonances. In the spirit of Jonathan Bennett, we can look to the work for insights and arguments relating to
philosophical problems identified within the agenda of modern academic philosophy. We may then find in the work theories—some perceptive, some out-

rageous—of issues under current debate: of free will and determinism, of mind-body relations, of necessity and contingency, of egoism and altruism. We can set aside Spinoza’s concern with detachment, acquiescence, joy or wisdom, seeking rather what Bennett sums up as ‘insight into philosophical truth’. Such readings of philosophical texts, not surprisingly, frequently take the form of analysis of the author’s ‘errors’. As Bennett says, responding to his critics, in a retrospective description of the methodology of his study of Spinoza, we can learn from Spinoza’s ‘illuminating failures’ (Bennett 1988:62).

Such an approach will be in marked contrast to the more sympathetic readings Bennett describes, in his Study of Spinoza’s Ethics, as the search for ‘rescuing interpretations’. Rather than attempting to make a philosophical author look ‘sensible’—as if everything in the Ethics should be regarded as true, if only we could understand it—we should focus, he thinks, on what bears out the author’s claim to philosophical stature. Returning to the theme in a later discussion, Bennett describes himself as more interested in what makes Spinoza look like a genius than in what makes him seem sensible. The work’s ‘errors’ reveal its author’s courage and intellectual recklessness, his ability to make daring connections that would not have occurred to anyone else. ‘These are not the ingredients of a recipe for seeming sensible’ (Bennett 1984:64).

There is much to commend in Bennett’s painstaking and rigorously critical assessment of Spinoza’s arguments. But it is important to be sensitive to the limitations of reading such a text as a source of ‘illuminating failures’ in the ongoing search for philosophical truth. Such an approach can too readily filter out those parts of the text which resist assimilation into current philosophical debate. It may well be the more obscure passages which, in their very strangeness, can offer the attentive—though perhaps initially bewildered—reader the richest philosophical education. It is no accident that Bennett’s reading sees no significance in the concluding sections of Part Five and fails to grasp its integral connections with earlier sections of the work, which are more readily assimilated into the language of contemporary academic philosophy.

Philosophically uninformed ‘affective readings’ can miss much of what the Ethics has to offer. But so too can a reading so

circumscribed by a contemporary philosophical agenda that whole sections of the work are dismissed as nonsense. Reading the Ethics can be a source of insight, not only into seventeenth-century philosophical preoccupations, but also into the contingent, distinctive features of our own philosophical practices, with their strengths and their limitations. Useful though it may be to reconstruct a seventeenth-century text as a contribution to our own philosophical debates, we need to be aware that in doing so we are ourselves engaging in a fiction. The text has its own questions, its own agenda. By moving consciously between the attempt to reconstruct it in our terms and the attempt to reconstruct it in its own terms, we may get richer insights than by following one method exclusively. Such a reading strategy may also make us more sceptical about ideals of ‘philosophical truth’ which are supposed to
encompass the shifting agendas of philosophical thought across the centuries. Politics, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind are interwoven in Spinoza’s writings. Their interconnections can highlight for us the more rigidly circumscribed divisions that characterise contemporary academic philosophy, and the contingency of our own conceptions of philosophy. Reading the Ethics can be a rich source too of cultural self-understanding. Spinoza, as we saw in chapter 1, is in many ways a philosophical outsider—at odds with what became the philosophical mainstream and its manifestations in our own ways of thinking. But he is also continuous with the historical influences on our thought patterns. We can play off the unfamiliar against the familiar in his work in ways that allow us to draw from him new ways of conceptualising some of our most fundamental ideas of self and society.

There is no one correct way of reading the Ethics. We may focus on its answers to ‘philosophical questions’—on what it can offer professional philosophical enquiry; or we may be primarily interested in reconstructing the work’s own intellectual context and agenda. Alternatively, we may want to put the text to work—applying it in our own rethinking of social and cultural issues. We may interrogate it as a source of insight into ‘philosophical truth’; or we may read it ‘affectively’—treating it primarily as a source of insight into how to live. But, if we read it exclusively in any one of these ways, we may miss the audacious nexus Spinoza makes between metaphysical

speculation, scientific theory, ethical reflection and the search for wisdom. From a contemporary perspective, one of the astonishing things about the Ethics is that Spinoza presents himself as deriving wisdom about issues of living and dying out of metaphysical theories of substance and attributes, mind and body, individuality and modality. The Ethics undoubtedly offers insights into philosophical problems still under debate in academic philosophy. But they are inseparable from articulations of reflective wisdom of a kind that are not commonly regarded as part of the agenda of contemporary academic philosophy.

Spinoza’s way of integrating metaphysics and ethics is unusual, not only in contemporary philosophical practice, but in the history of modern philosophy. Despite all that links it to the projects of modernity, the Ethics reaffirms a much older conception of philosophy. It picks up ancient debates, where questions about the nature of knowledge and of the ultimate natures of things were integrated with reflection on the mental attitudes required for a well-lived life.

The concept of wisdom was central in Hellenistic philosophy—in ongoing debates between Scepticism, Epicureanism and Stoicism about how best to attain tranquillity. The divergent paths to wisdom and tranquillity were integrated with theories of what we can and should aspire to know; with the consideration of whether, why and how we should ‘suspend judgment’; with reflection on the right attitude to ‘impressions’, ‘impulse’ and ‘assent’. Ethical concerns and scientific speculation came together in the ‘equipoise’ associated with Pyrrho’s scepticism—an ‘indifference’ to the passions, opinions and unfounded judgments that make the life of the masses a constant vacillation. The Epicureans and the Stoics also associated the lack of tranquillity with unfounded ‘opinions’, though in different ways from the Sceptics. Whereas the Pyrrhonists rejected the possibility of moving from sensation or opinion to judgments of truth and falsehood, the Epicureans and Stoics regarded the wise mind as having access to truth. They nonetheless associated freedom from disturbance with the shedding of vain desires originating in empty opinion; and the Stoics treated the passions
themselves as false opinions or mistaken judgments. The wise mind—however its wisdom is reached—was typically seen in Hellenistic philosophy as having a stability, a lack of vacillation, which is epistemologically based. The search for understanding is the search also for a constant tranquillity; the wise mind is characterised by a secure, thoughtful self-repose.

These ancient themes of wisdom, tranquillity and the right attitudes to the changeable are echoed in the Ethics. But they are not just a quaint remnant of older philosophical concerns. Spinoza is not just reiterating themes of ancient philosophy. He is rethinking, in a modern setting—framed by the Cartesian attempt to secure the foundations of science—the ancient integration of metaphysics and ethics. We miss much of what we can learn from reading the Ethics if we do not attend to this rationale of the work. We have seen Spinoza transform metaphysical theses into ethics. From the relations between substance and attributes, emerges a God who is immanent both in mind and in matter. From the mind’s status as idea of the body emerges its transformation from the bondage of passivity to the freedom of adequate knowledge. From a treatment of individuality which breaks the nexus with the traditional concept of substance emerges a new version of the eternity of the mind. From a dynamic physics of bodies emerges a new naturalisation of collective social power.

In Spinoza’s political writings this integration of metaphysics and ethics is developed further—into conclusions about the appropriate institutional structures and political practices for socialised bodies. Spinoza’s politics, as Negri says, is not a decorative addition to his philosophy, but the soul of his metaphysics—‘the metaphysics of the imagination, the metaphysics of the human constitution of reality, the world’ (Negri 1981:97). From an analysis of the constitutive powers of the lower forms of knowledge, Spinoza constructs a powerful diagnosis of the strengths and terrors of ‘the multitude, and of the political problem of transforming it into a free people.’

It is difficult for us contemporary readers to recapture the full scope of this extraordinary synthesis of areas of philosophy we think of as distinct—of philosophical enquiry with reflective wisdom about ways of living and, especially, of practical politics with initially rarified metaphysics. But what may at first seem a remote and impenetrable philosophic system—lost in the heights of abstraction—emerges on attentive and reflective reading as a rich source of insight into the operations of ordinary consciousness, and into the potential of the philosophical imagination to engage with and enrich that consciousness.

The Ethics makes a bridge between the practices of modern and ancient philosophy. But there is no nostalgia here for lost ideals. Despite its echoes of ancient themes this is a strikingly modern work. It has often been read as a poignantly deluded exaltation of the efficacy and supremacy of reason. But that is to ignore Spinoza’s subtle engagement with complex unities of reason, imagination and affect. Beyond the fantasies of both rationalism and romanticism, Spinoza’s Ethics challenges ideals of reason epitomised in modern philosophy. It confronts us with a way of thinking which is both rational and emotional, both philosophical and
imaginative, both speculative and wise. In our own times such syntheses are no less excellent, difficult and rare than they were in his.

Notes

1 Spinoza in his time and ours

1 The Lucas biography, together with other biographical material including the record of excommunication, can be found in Wolf (1929). The Colerus biography is included as an appendix in Pollock (1899):387-418.

2 It has been suggested, indeed, that the geographical features of a country where land and sea are indeterminately separated, and the sky is in a state of perpetual alteration, lend to seventeenth-century Dutch culture a distinctive preoccupation with oppositions and their transformation. The modern historian Simon Schama suggests in his study of Dutch life of the period, The Embarrassment of Riches, that its art manifests a characteristic fluctuation between opposites—between morals and matter, between the durable and the ephemeral, the concrete and the imaginary. We are made to see still life as ‘[l]ife in death; animation in immobility; the illusion of vitality and the reality of inertia’. The artists capture living things at ‘the zenith before the fall; the moment of perfect ripeness before the decay’ (Schama 1988:10-11).

3 For a useful discussion of the uses of the term ‘idea’ in seventeenth-century philosophy, see McRae (1965).

4 The resemblances between Spinoza, Maimonides and Aristotle are discussed in Wolfson (1934: vol. II, 24).

5 In Hobbes’s Leviathan, ‘endeavours’ are identified as the ‘small beginnings of Motion, within the body of Man, before they appear in walking, speaking, striking, and other visible actings’ (Hobbes 1651) Part I, Ch. 6, 119). In his treatment of body, in the Elements of Philosophy, the concept of endeavour is interconnected with concepts of velocity, impetus and resistance. There he defines endeavour as motion made in less space of time than can be given. (Hobbes 1989: Part III, Ch. XV, 97). The concept of endeavour enters also into Hobbes’s treatment of mental concepts. The motion in a sentient being which is propagated by the heart helps or hinders the motion of the blood to produce pleasure when it ‘helpeth’, pain when it ‘hindereth’. The tendency of motion to preserve itself here becomes appetite—the endeavour that tends towards things known by experience to be pleasant—and, when it shuns what is troublesome, aversion (Hobbes 1989: Part III, Ch. XV, 130-2).

6 For useful discussions of the Stoic dimensions of Spinoza’s thought see Kristeller (1984), and Susan James (1993).

7 See Long and Sedley (1987), sec. 65, especially Section J, 414.

The historian of ideas Frederick Beiser tracks the philosophical and cultural meanings of ‘Spinoza’ at this period in his book *The Fate of Reason* (1987).


See especially Sessions (1977); Naess (1977) and (1980); and Lloyd (1980) and (1994:154-60).


This kind of explanation of the geometric method is well described in R. S. Woolhouse (1993:31).


Malamud’s use of Spinoza in *The Fixer* is the subject of an interesting discussion in Cook (1989).

For a discussion of the implications of Spinoza’s treatment of the mind-body relation for the conceptualisation of sexual difference, see Lloyd (1994:160-8).

See Curley (1993:119), and also Curley (1990).

The episode is mentioned in a manuscript note by Leibniz, who claims to have been informed of it by Spinoza. See Pollock (1899:35).

**God, minds and bodies**

Deleuze’s development of the Spinozistic concept of expression is critically discussed by Macherey (1996).

See Bennett (1984:66-70) and Don Garrett (1990).


See Guéroult (1968):428-61

On the issues at stake in the debate over ‘subjective’ versus ‘objective’ interpretations of Spinoza’s attributes, see Jarrett (1977).

In Grene (1973:164-81); Donagan discusses the issue of the distinctness of the attributes again in Donagan (1980). For a useful discussion of other issues raised by de Vries in relation to the attributes, see Trompeter (1981).

8 The implications of IP16 for the connections between Spinoza’s treatment of attributes, his concept of God’s understanding and his later treatment of intuitive knowledge are the subject of an interesting paper by Wilson (1983).

9 The phrase is from a letter from Leibniz to Arnauld 14 July 1686, as in Loemker (1969:336).

10 The implications of Spinoza’s identification of minds with God’s ideas are criticised by Wilson (1980).

11 For discussions of Spinoza’s version of the ‘identity’ of mind and body, see Mark (1979); Allison (1987), ch. 4, part 1; Matson (1975); Odegard (1975): Bennett (1981); Delahunty (1985:197); Jarrett (1982a), (1982b); Della Rocca (1993).

12 Points of resemblance between Merleau-Ponty and Spinoza—including some interesting affinities between Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘flesh’ and Spinoza’s concept of substance—are discussed in Pietersma (1988).

13 For a discussion of Spinoza in relation to the importance of both first-person and third-person perspectives in an adequate philosophy of mind, see Mark (1979:411-13).

14 See Norris (1991:217-50)


17 Commentators differ on whether Spinoza should be interpreted as saying that all intuitive knowledge is necessarily of individuals. For a discussion of the issues, see Carr (1978).

18 For further discussion of the differences between Descartes and Spinoza on intellect, will and judgment, see Curley (1975); Cottingham (1988); Steinberg (1993); and Lloyd (1994:59-75).

3 From bondage to freedom

1 For an informative discussion of Stoic treatments of emotion, see Frede (1984).

2 The concept of conatus and its role in Spinoza’s treatment of the emotions is discussed by Rice (1977) and by Rotenstreich (1977).

3 For a useful critique of Bennett’s arguments against Spinoza’s transition from individual self-preservation to social virtue, see Barbone (1993). The issue of whether or not Spinoza’s ethical doctrine involves ‘egoism’ is also extensively discussed in Steinberg (1984).

4 The quotation is from Epictetus, Manual 5.

See the Transcendental Deduction (B version) in Kant (1787:151-75).

For discussions of the contrasts between Descartes’s and Spinoza’s treatments of the nature of the passions and of their ‘remedies’, see Cottingham (1988); Hoffman (1991); Lloyd (1994:77-104).

4
Intuitive knowledge and the intellectual love of God


5
The way to wisdom

Richard Rorty has drawn useful distinctions between ‘rational reconstructions’ and ‘historical reconstructions’ as approaches to the history of philosophy. See his ‘The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres’, in Rorty et al. (1984:49-76).

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