

SPINOZA'S METAPHYSICS FROM THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Robert Kyle Driggers: Spinoza's Metaphysics from the Human Perspective
(Under the direction of Alan Nelson)

In this dissertation, I argue that Spinoza intended his metaphysics to be understood from the “human perspective.” On my interpretation, Spinoza’s theory about the fundamental nature of reality—his theory of God’s attributes—is intended to render reality wholly intelligible to human beings. This interpretation contrasts sharply with the vast majority of interpretations of Spinoza’s metaphysics. According to most readers, Spinoza took God to have humanly uncognizable attributes, or, aspects of reality that humans cannot cognize. This commitment threatens the coherence of Spinoza’s philosophy.

First, I argue that my Human Perspective Interpretation is licensed by Spinoza’s text—most interpreters take his text to mandate a God’s Perspective Interpretation on which there are humanly uncognizable aspects of reality. I argue that an exhaustive textual analysis reveals that there is no such mandate. Second, I argue that Spinoza’s theory of God’s attributes is a theory about the different ways we conceive God and not a theory about God’s intrinsic nature. The attributes, in other words, are only conceptually distinct from God. Finally, I argue that we ought to prefer the Human Perspective Interpretation because God’s Perspective Interpretations commit Spinoza to the view that he could not understand his own metaphysics. Ultimately, if Spinoza’s project of assisting humans in attaining contentment of mind and virtue is to be successful, his work must be understood from the human perspective.

To Jennie.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND CITATION GUIDE

I will depart only slightly from the citation scheme proposed by Curley (1985, xix). When necessary, I will cite the specific volume, page, and line number from Gebhardt using the following scheme: Volume/Page/Line, e.g., I/611/5-9 refers to the fifth through ninth lines of the six hundred and eleventh page of the first volume of Gebhardt.

For citations of the *Ethics*, I will typically cite Spinoza using his geometrical form. For example, 1P32c2 refers to the second corollary of the thirty second proposition of the first part of the *Ethics*. The following scheme will be used to cite the *Ethics*:

App = Appendix

A = Axiom

c = corollary

D (upper case) = Definition

d (lower case) = Demonstration

Exp = Explanation

P = Proposition

s = Scholium

I will use the following abbreviations for Spinoza's works. Note that I will typically cite the Gebhardt line numbers, though with Spinoza's letters I sometimes make reference to the letter as a whole, e.g. Ep 12 = the entirety of Letter 12.

KV = *Short Treatise*

Ep = *Letters*

TIE = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*

PP = *Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy"*

CM = *Appendix Concerning Metaphysical Thoughts*

TTP = *Theological-Political Treatise*

When citing PP, I will use the same scheme as for the *Ethics*, e.g. PP 1D5 refers to the fifth definition of the first part of PP. The KV is divided into parts, chapters, and sections. I will use, e.g. KV II, xxv, 1 to refer to the first section of the twenty fifth chapter of the second part of KV. The TIE is divided into sections, which I will refer to with e.g., TIE, 101 is the hundred and first section of TIE. CM is divided into parts and chapters, so I will refer to them with e.g. CM I/ii to refer to the second chapter of the first part. For the TTP, I will cite the chapter and section, e.g., TTP 1, 25). Gebhardt numbers will be included when necessary.

In some cases, I will cite Descartes. When I do, I will cite the Adam and Tannery pagination with “ap.” and the Cottingham-Stoothoff-Murdoch translation with “p.” When I cite the *Meditations*, I will cite the meditation (e.g., M6 for the *Sixth Meditation*) and these two forms of pagination. When I cite the *Principles of Philosophy*, I will follow the scheme for the *Ethics* and PP and will also include this dual pagination.

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

The following chapters examine the role that the human perspective plays in Baruch Spinoza's philosophy. There is a common question in the background of each article: who is Spinoza's philosophy for? Is it an attempt to give a systematic account of the nature of reality, insofar as human beings understand it? Or is it an attempt to tell us what there "really is" beyond that perspective, or from God's perspective? In each article, I argue that Spinoza's philosophy is for *us*. It is intended to guide us to clear and certain knowledge of the nature of reality, from our unique vantage on it. To illustrate the themes of these articles, I invite the reader to participate in an imaginative exercise.

2. Becoming Acquainted with the "Human Perspective"

Imagine that you are Spinoza, writing down the propositions, demonstrations, scholia that constitute your masterwork, the *Ethics*. Your expressed goal in writing the *Ethics*, and indeed in pursuing philosophy in general, is to assist your readers in attaining blessedness.¹ By

¹ See e.g., the appendix to Part I and the preface to Part II and Part V of the *Ethics*.

At 2P49s, Spinoza writes,

Insofar as it teaches that we act only from God's command, that we share in the divine nature, and that we do this the more, the more perfect our actions are, and the more and more we understand God. This

“blessedness,” you mean a state of being where people are as free as possible from fear, confusion, hatred, and come to see the value of fellow feeling and rational decision-making. You believe that this eminently valuable practical goal is best achieved by rendering the world intelligible to your readers. “If people had clear and certain knowledge of the true nature of things, they could learn to moderate their negative emotions and learn to love the world rather than fear or hate it” is your guiding thought.

The most foundational part of the clear and certain knowledge you wish to impart to your readers your knowledge of the nature of God. God, after all, is the foundation on which everything else rests. To attain this knowledge, you decide to abandon what your imagination—your sense perception, memory, language—and the imaginations of others have told you about God. After all, you believe that imagination cannot give you clear and certain knowledge of anything.² Instead, you decide to use your intellect, the active faculty in your mind responsible for clarifying and ordering your thoughts, to determine what God is.

Your intellect gives you a radically different understanding of God than is taught in religious circles.³ Reflection on the essence of God leads you to believe that God is not a

doctrine, then, in addition to giving us complete peace of mind, also teaches us wherein our greatest happiness, *or* blessedness, consists: viz. in the knowledge of God alone, by which we are led to do only those things which love and morality advise. From this we clearly understand how far they stray from the true valuation of virtue, who expect to be honored by God with the greatest rewards for their virtue and best actions, as for the greatest bondage—as if virtue itself, and the service of God, were not happiness itself, and the greatest freedom (II/135/34).

In TIE, Spinoza writes,

Everyone will now be able to see that I wish to direct all the sciences toward one end ² and goal, viz. that we should achieve, as we have said, the highest human perfection. So anything in the sciences which does nothing to advance us toward our goal must be rejected as useless—in a word, all our activities and thoughts are to be directed to this end (16, II/9/13).

² E.g., 1App. (II/81/34-II/84)

³ This is a recurring theme of the TTP, especially chapters 4-11. Also, 1App, *passim*.

superhuman being. God is not an infinitely merciful, compassionate being who has constructed a world unfolding according to a grand, anthropocentric narrative. Your intellect reveals that God, far from being a compassionate governor of and tinkerer with Nature, is in fact *identical* to Nature. God, you argue across the course of Part I and Part II of the *Ethics*, is the sole substance, the sole being that is the cause of itself and that depends on nothing else for its existence (1P14). Everything else—your mind, your body, the minds and bodies of fellow people, and indeed all of creation—ultimately depends on God for its existence. In fact, you come to see, everything that isn't God is just a "mode" of God or *way* that God is.

Your intellect has led you to reject the traditional theology of your contemporaries. Your God is not human-like in any interesting sense. But, this leads you to the question: what *is* God, essentially? What distinguishes God from everything else? Though you have realized that the old imaginative conceptions of God are flawed, you do not yet have a clear and distinct idea of what God actually is. To answer this question, you do not begin by investigating God's essence directly. It's not clear to you how to go about that. Instead, you start with what you are sure you know and see if you can arrive at certain knowledge of God's essence by reflecting on that.

You are certain that you think and that you feel the effects of a body (2A2, 2A4). You also know that you are not a self-sufficient thing: you did not create yourself and you will eventually perish (2P10). You reason that if you are a material and thinking thing, then you must depend on other material and thinking things. It first occurs to you that your body depends on a number of smaller bodies at any given time, and on various bodies across time. The same is true of your mind and its ideas: they all seem to depend on other ideas for their existence. And you realize that the same is true for all other modes of God: they are either

thinking or extended things that depend on other thinking and extended things for their existence. You realize that these chains of dependence cannot go on forever: there must be something on which all of the thinking and extended things depend: an infinite thinking and extended substance. You call this God. And you say that God therefore has the “attributes” of Thought and Extension.⁴

Though you prefer to talk in terms “God’s attributes,” you realize that you are no longer describing the essence of some divine being. You use the term “attributes” to describe Nature in the most general, fundamental terms. To say that God has the attributes of Thought and Extension entails that everything is either an extended thing or a thinking thing.

As far as you can tell, these are the only attributes that God has. Your proofs that God has these attributes began with reflection on your own experience of God. And you started with the certainty that you had a mind and body. However, you are also certain that you are aware of nothing other than thinking and extended things. There is not some third or fourth kind of thing that you can cognize (2A5). You would say that these are the “limits” of your experience, but you have no idea what could be on the other side of those “limits.”⁵

Therefore, you find yourself unable to prove that any “other attributes” belong to God, that is, attributes distinct from Thought and Extension. In fact, you can’t even conceive what another “attribute” would be. This does not stop you from having the occasional inchoate feeling that there must be more to God than these two attributes: sometimes, when you are not thinking as clearly as you normally do, it strikes you as arbitrary that God would

⁴ The preceding is an interpretation of the reasoning given for 2P1 and 2P2, which establish that God has the attributes of Thought and Extension.

⁵ This claim will be explored in Chapter 3. The idea is that we cannot understand what would be “on the other side” because we understand everything via Thought or Extension (1P10, 2A5, Ep 63-66).

have two rather than three or four attributes.⁶ But for the life of you, you cannot convert this feeling into knowledge by conceiving of what “those” attributes might be and whether or not they might exist. Perhaps God knows what they are and whether they exist, but you are not God and you can’t make clear sense of what it would be for *God* to know other attributes.

At best, you can describe God as *you* understand God. Whether or not that’s the way that God “really” or “objectively” is, or the way that God is for some other different kind of being, is not an issue for you. (It’s not clear to you what these words in scare quotes could mean in the first place.) After all, you cannot escape your own perspective: you cannot survey the world from God’s vantage point, just like you cannot survey the world from the standpoint of another human being. So, you avoid including speculations and commitments about how God understands things in your writings.

3. The Human Perspective, Characterized

What you have been imagining along with Spinoza is how God is understood from what I call the “human perspective”: from the “inside” of the mind of a human trying to form clear and certain knowledge of God. If we read Spinoza from this perspective, we understand Spinoza’s task in constructing his theory of God and God’s attributes is to render the God intelligible *to human beings*. The resulting theory he defends is a description of God *insofar* as human beings experience and understand God.

Insofar as Spinoza philosophizes from the human perspective, he never endorses positions—positive or negative—about aspects of reality (attributes) that he takes himself to be unable to cognize. And he never does so because he is aware that his theory about the

⁶ E.g., Note d of KV/I/i at I/17/40-I/18.

nature and “limits” of human thought places restrictions on his theory about the nature of God. In general, Spinoza never endorses commitments pertaining to the existence or nature of things that *he* cannot conceive when his ideas are at their most clear and distinct.

3.1. The Cognizability Condition

The chapters in this dissertation defend an interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of God’s attributes, on which that theory was constructed from the human perspective. It is the central thesis of this interpretation that Spinoza’s theory of God’s attributes does not violate what I will refer to as the **Cognizability Condition**.

Cognizability Condition Everything is cognizable by human beings.

Nearly all of Spinoza’s interpreters disagree with this central thesis.⁷ That is, they assume that Spinoza believed in the existence of aspects of reality that humans cannot cognize. According to the majority of Spinoza’s readers, God has attributes other than Thought and Extension that humans cannot cognize.

Interpretations that violate the **Cognizability Condition** result from approaching Spinoza’s metaphysics from a different perspective. These interpretations approach Spinoza’s metaphysics from what I will refer to as “God’s Perspective.”⁸ On these interpretations, Spinoza’s theory of the attributes attempts to describe God from a God’s own

⁷ See Chapter 1 for a lengthy citation of all of those interpreters who understand Spinoza to deny the Condition.

⁸ I have slightly modified Putnam’s (1990) term, “God’s-Eye View” here. Nagel (1986) refers to this perspective as The View from Nowhere. Moore (2000) refers to the capacity to form an “absolute representation” from no point of view. I do not wish to engage in psychoanalysis of rival interpreters. When I say that these interpretations “result” from doing philosophy from God’s Perspective, I mean to say that their interpretations are only coherent if we assume that they ignore the constraints on human cognition proposed by Spinoza when trying to understand Spinoza’s metaphysics.

perspective: from the perspective of an infinite being with perfect knowledge of everything. Another imaginative exercise will make what I mean by “God’s Perspective” clear.

4. Becoming Acquainted with “God’s Perspective”

Imagine that you are Spinoza, writing down the various propositions, demonstrations, and scholia of the *Ethics*. Your primary goal in the first two parts of the *Ethics* is to describe God as God “really is,” and not just as some select group of finite creatures understand God. Insofar as it is possible, you want to take on God’s perspective, because only God can have total knowledge of God’s own essence. Your human experience and understanding of God is embarrassingly limited and prone to error in various ways. At best, the limitations of your mind can provide only a partial or corrupted understanding of everything. Only an infinite being could give a “wholly objective,” account of God. This account will of course include a story about how things appear from the myopic perspective of a human, but that will be only a small part of the account. The whole account could show that the human perspective has a partial understanding or maybe even a systematic illusion about the true nature of things.⁹

Somehow, you manage to channel God’s perspective, or you dissemble to your readers that you can. Your various metaphysical positions suggest that you are able to get a glimpse into the way that the world “really is” from the divine vantage solely by relying on *a priori* reflection that begins in your meager experience. Some future person named Immanuel Kant will criticize you at length for this method of proceeding.¹⁰ After all, how could

⁹ An “Objective Interpretation” would hold that we have a partial understanding of God because we understand only two of God’s infinitely many attributes. A “Subjective Interpretation” would hold that what we call “attributes” are not part of God’s “real essence.” These interpretations, both of which I call “God’s Perspective Interpretations” will be discussed throughout this dissertation.

¹⁰ See the First and Third Antinomies in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Also, Chapters 2 and 3 of Boehm.

reflection on your experience that is limited by the nature of your cognition be used to channel the infinite divine perspective? How were you able to transcend your own cognitive limitations to see the world as it “really is”? You never say. Perhaps, this is because you did not think carefully enough about whether your metaphysical project was ruled out as unthinkable by your theory of your own cognition.

In any case, because you are somehow able to glimpse the world from God’s perspective, you speculate and make commitments to the existence of things that you could not cognize when you adopted the human perspective.

For example, when you remained within the human perspective, you were able to understand God only as an essentially thinking and extended substance. From your higher vantage, however, your former belief that God has only these two attributes seems like epistemic chauvinism. Because God is an infinite being with *infinite* attributes (1D6), you argue, God must have more than a finite *number* of attributes. You can tell this much about them: they exist, and they are uncognizable to human beings. There are presumably other alien creatures that are modes of these alien attributes too, though you will never know them and they don’t even suspect your existence. Your communion with the divine perspective is still limited, the rest of the details about these alien attributes and creatures are hazy.

Or perhaps, if another interpretation is right, you might come to say that what you called “attributes” do *not* constitute God’s essence after all! You discover that God has an essence that is radically different than any human being could have conceived. For humans, God is an essentially hidden and mysterious being. All of the best human attempts to represent God are pitiful failures. Humans misperceive God as a thinking and extended substance, but this is not how God represents itself. You see now that God has a “real

essence” that human beings cannot grasp. From this point of view, you see that the attributes are merely subjective illusions.

Regardless of what you see from God’s perspective, you discover that the large part of the truth about God’s “real nature” is otiose for your stated practical purposes.¹¹ Because your main goal in the first two parts of the *Ethics* was to represent the world “objectively” or to see how it “really” is beyond the human perspective, you must ignore large parts of your metaphysical theory when constructing your theory of the human mind and its affects.¹² And your bizarre visions of alien creatures or ineffable essences deserve no mention when you promise other humans that the path to the good life requires seeing things as they “really are.” In short, you make no effort to integrate central theses in your metaphysical theory into your overall ethical project.

As my description of the God’s Perspective approach suggests, I believe that this approach to Spinoza’s metaphysics has inescapable shortcomings. Nevertheless, some version of this approach is adopted almost without exception in the secondary literature on Spinoza’s theory of God’s attributes. If I am right, and the God’s Perspective approach radically misunderstands Spinoza’s most fundamental views on the nature of God, then we need to explicate and defend an alternative.

¹¹ And not for your theoretical purposes, either. I agree with Bennett, who writes,

The situation regarding the proposition that there are more than two attributes is this: Spinoza was under no pressure to assert it, nothing in the *Ethics* unquestionably means it, none of the work’s structures reflects it, and if it were added to the *Ethics* and fully developed it would create an impossible problem for Spinoza’s epistemology. (78)

¹² Indeed, even if Spinoza believed in “other attributes,” he does not refer to them in Part III-V of the *Ethics*, where the psychology and explicit discussion of blessedness is contained.

5. The “Objective” and “Subjective” Interpretations

It is typical for interpreters to believe that they must choose between an “Objective” or “Subjective” Interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of God’s attributes. On the latter, the attributes are what we humans perceive of God’s essence. However, our perceptions are illusory: God is not essentially what we perceive God to be. On the former, the human intellect’s perception of God’s essence is accurate, but partial. The attributes are what God perceives of God’s own essence and the finite human perception of God’s essence is accurate in virtue of that fact.

The nearly unquestioned consensus in current Spinoza scholarship is that some version of the Objective Interpretation is correct. In addition, every Objectivist that I am aware of also believes that God has more attributes than the ones that human beings perceive. There are “other attributes” in addition to Thought and Extension—infininitely many of them. While not required by the mere “Objectivity” of the attributes, it is typically understood to be idealistic or at least unduly anthropocentric to think that God has just the two attributes known to humans.¹³

The Objective/Subjective dichotomy does not exhaust our interpretative options. I suggest that we instead think in terms of the dichotomy between God’s Perspective and Human Perspective Interpretations. This dichotomy reveals a crucial overlap between the Objective and Subjective interpretations: they both have Spinoza violating the Cognizability Condition. In other words, I will argue, both of these interpretations commit Spinoza to the view that there are aspects of reality that are uncognizable to human beings. For one class of

¹³ For example, see Newlands (2012).

Objectivists, it is the “other attributes;” for another class it is also “attribute-neutral” or “trans-attribute” features; for Subjectivists it is God’s “real essence.” In contrast, the Human Perspective Interpretation begins with the interpretative hypothesis that Spinoza commits only to humanly cognizable aspects of reality because that is all he *can* commit to.

6. The Human Perspective Interpretation, stated

Let me now state the commitments of the Human Perspective Interpretation in more technical terms. On the Human Perspective Interpretation, the attributes are what *we* accurately perceive of God’s essence. We perceive God to be thinking and extended substance and nothing else. We cannot make sense of what another “attribute” would be, so a commitment to God’s having “that” attribute would be nonsensical. This is consistent with God’s having infinite attributes. When Spinoza says that God has “infinite attributes,” he means that God unlimited attributes. In other words, God lacks no attribute.

Furthermore, on the Human Perspective Interpretation, God is *identical* to God’s attributes. The attributes are not aspects or properties of God, they *are* God. At the heart of Spinoza’s theory of the attributes is a theory about what Descartes called the “conceptual distinction” between God and its attributes. On my interpretation, Spinoza’s view is that the attributes (Thought and Extension) are only distinguished from each other and from God *by the human intellect*. In reality, God and God’s attributes are identical.

Spinoza uses the names for the distinct attributes to indicate the distinct ways humans can conceive God. One way of conceiving God is as an infinite thinking thing; one is as an infinite extended thing. Both ways of conceiving God are “cognitive routes” to the same idea: an idea in each human mind of a single, infinite substance. These paths do not cross: we can conceive the attributes as “really distinct” because we cannot conceive thinking things in

terms of extended things and vice versa. We realize, however, that there can be no corresponding distinction in God.

7. Why the Human Perspective Interpretation?

It seems to me that the Human Perspective Interpretation makes better sense of Spinoza's decision to call his masterwork the *Ethics*. Spinoza clearly intended his work to be beneficial to human beings, and so our perspective on the work ought to play a central role. It also seems to me that the Human Perspective Interpretation better captures the systematicity of the *Ethics*. Because the *Ethics* gives us a theory of human cognition, it also gives us a theory about what it is to understand a work of philosophy. If the *Ethics* presents a system of philosophy, the system ought not say of itself that the system cannot be understood by its audience. On the Human Perspective Interpretation, Spinoza's system itself is cognizable by humans, according to the system's account of human cognition.

However, these are not the sole reasons for adopting the Human Perspective Interpretation. I will argue that the Human Perspective Interpretation is preferable because (1) it makes better sense of Spinoza's text in the *Ethics* and other works than the God's Perspective Interpretations and (2) because it avoids a number of philosophical problems endemic to the God's Perspective Interpretations.

8. The Chapters to Follow

In "Spinoza's Theory of the Attributes: A Textual Analysis," I will argue that the Human Perspective Interpretation is consistent with Spinoza's text. Most of Spinoza's interpreters assume that his text *requires* a God's Perspective Interpretation. I argue that Spinoza's text not only fails to mandate such an interpretation but actually favors the Human Perspective

Interpretation. This lengthy textual analysis will focus largely on the textual questions of how Spinoza uses the notion of an “attribute” and related notions throughout his text and on whether he committed to humanly uncognizable attributes.

In “The Identity of Substance and its Distinct Attributes in Spinoza,” I will defend the Human Perspective Interpretation’s account of the relationship between God and God’s attributes in Spinoza. The account answers this fundamental question: how can one, simple substance (God) be identical to two “really distinct” attributes? On the Human Perspective Interpretation, Spinoza believes that a substance and its attributes are only *conceptually* distinct. We can conceive God either as a thinking and extended thing, but we can understand that this distinction does not “divide” God in anyway.

In “Could Spinoza Understand his own Theory of God’s Attributes?” I will argue that God’s Perspective Interpretations commit Spinoza to the belief that he could not understand his own theory of God’s attributes. It is not possible, on Spinoza’s account of the nature of human cognition, for humans to cognize commitments to the existence of uncognizable things. We can avoid ascribing this self-defeating view to Spinoza if we adopt the Human Perspective Interpretation.

CHAPTER 1: SPINOZA'S THEORY OF THE ATTRIBUTES: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

1. Introduction

What is God? According to Spinoza, we must answer this question before we can answer any others. Spinoza's answer is simple and heterodox: God is not a superhuman being. God is not essentially an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being separate from Nature. Instead, God just *is* Nature. Because Spinoza's God just is Nature, Spinoza's theory of God's attributes is really a theory about the fundamental nature of reality. According to Spinoza, God has the attributes of Thought and Extension: in other words, Nature is characterized fundamentally as mental and material.

How do I know this, according to Spinoza? I know that *I* am a thinking thing (a mind) and a material thing (a body) and furthermore I know that I ultimately depend on God to exist. So, it must be that God too is a thinking and material thing.

I will refer to Spinoza's account of what God essentially is as his theory of God's attributes, or simply as the theory of the attributes, since there are no beings with attributes except for God. One of the most important and difficult projects in the scholarship on Spinoza's metaphysics is understanding the theory of the attributes. The debates over the nature of God's attributes and their relationship to God are really debates about how to understand the foundations of Spinoza's metaphysics.

Spinoza's theory of God's attributes is Spinoza's attempt to render God intelligible to human beings. The main goal of Spinoza's metaphysics, after all, is to rid our conception of the world of mystery and confusion because these are two central, and ultimately avoidable, causes of human misery. Remarkably, almost all of Spinoza's interpreters understand Spinoza's theory of the attributes to simultaneously reveal God to be infinitely mysterious—that is, infinitely uncognizable to human beings.

On the so-called Subjective Interpretation, the “attributes” are our mistaken perceptions of God's “real essence.”¹⁴ On this view, Spinoza *begins* with the assumption that we cannot comprehend God and then goes on to describe what we *mistakenly* comprehend about God. Perhaps only the creator of the Subjective Interpretation, Wolfson thought it was the best interpretation.

Instead, is currently mandatory in Spinoza scholarship to assume our perceptions of God's essence are at least partially accurate.¹⁵ On the Objective Interpretation, we rightly understand God to be a thinking and extended thing. Nearly every supporter of an Objective

¹⁴ The distinction between “Objective” and “Subjective” interpretations was introduced by Wolfson (1934,v.1,146).

¹⁵ The following is a partial list of supporters of the Objective Interpretation, each of whom is cited at the end of this dissertation: Allison, Ariew, Bennett, Curley, Delahunty, Deleuze, Della Rocca, Donagan, Garrett, Gueroult, Haserot, Huebner, Joachim, Laerke, Lin, Martens, Melamed, Morrison, Nadler, Newlands, Parkinson, Radner.

As Shein (511, n.12) notes, there are various ways one can be an “Objectivist”: one can think that the distinction among the *attributes* is objective and one can think that the distinction between *substance* and attribute is objective. I will use the term to refer to anyone who believes that these distinctions are drawn in God's intellect and not merely in the human intellect. One is forced to be an “objectivist” if they believe that God has attributes other than Thought and Extension. This might lead one to ask: could one be an Objectivist *and* think that there are only two attributes? Technically, this is an available option in conceptual space, but it would be odd for Spinoza to hold such a position. It would be, after all, highly anthropocentric, and (in a pejorative sense) idealistic for Spinoza to think that the human and divine perspectives *exactly* line up. What could explain this congruence?

Interpretation also believes that Spinoza took God to have other, humanly uncognizable attributes. In addition to Thought and Extension, the attributes we can cognize, Spinoza's God has an infinite collection of "other attributes" that we cannot cognize, on the Objective Interpretation.

I consider both the Objective and Subjective Interpretations to be what I'll call God's Perspective Interpretations. On both of these interpretations, Spinoza's theory of the attributes is not a theory about God as God is understood by human beings. Instead, the theory explains how *God* understands God's own essence. The task of Spinoza's theory and indeed of his entire metaphysical system is to give an account of what God "really" or "objectively" is, apart from how God is understood from any finite perspective. Only from this transcendental perspective could Spinoza entertain the possibility that there are aspects of reality that humans cannot cognize.

Even if Spinoza's answer to the question "What is God?" is not mysterious to God, it ought to seem mysterious to us. However, we could forgive Spinoza of flirting with mysticism if his commitment to God's being mostly incomprehensible is required by a correct answer to the question "What is God?" However, as many interpreters who adopt the God's Perspective Interpretations readily admit, Spinoza's commitment to God's uncognizability is blatantly inconsistent with some of his other central metaphysical doctrines.

For example, the Subjective Interpretation both requires that we cannot understand God *at all* and that the "attributes" give us knowledge of God's essence. Spinoza explicitly says that "The human Mind has adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence."

(2P47) How can we have *knowledge* of God’s essence in the form of “merely subjective” attributes?

On the Objective Interpretation, Spinoza’s so-called “parallelism” of mind and body is incoherent. Spinoza argues at 2P7 that the modes of God’s different attributes are “one and the same,” albeit understood under different attributes. For example, my mind and body are “one and the same,” but my mind is conceived via Thought and my body is conceived via Extension. This suggests that each attribute will have exactly the same quantity of modes. However, Spinoza also argues that there is an idea of each “thing” in God’s intellect. (To put it less technically, God understands everything.) This suggests that there is a mode of Thought corresponding to each mode of every attribute. There are therefore modes of Thought corresponding to not only the modes of Extension, but also modes of Thought corresponding to modes of each of the infinitely many “other” attributes. This is plainly inconsistent with the claim that each attribute has the same quantity of modes as any other.¹⁶

I have argued elsewhere that the God’s Perspective Interpretations also require Spinoza to believe that neither he nor his audience can understand the *theory* of the attributes in the first place.¹⁷ That is, Spinoza’s very commitment to God’s uncognizability is itself uncognizable to human beings because Spinoza’s theory of human cognition says that we

¹⁶ At least one of Spinoza’s contemporaries, Tschirnhaus, was aware of this problem (Ep 70, IV/299/23-27). Unfortunately, Spinoza did not respond to this concern in the letters we have. See also Curley (1969, 145-147), Melamed (2013, 153-162). This metaphysical problem is sometimes conflated with an epistemological problem discussed by Tschirnhaus in Ep 63 and 65. In those letters, Tschirnhaus asks: if there are infinitely many attributes, why do we know of only two of them? Bennett (78) worries that Spinoza cannot adequately answer this question and Melamed (*ibid.*) dedicates most of his interpretative work on the attributes to answering this question. In Chapter 3, I give an explicit reconstruction that answers this question. The answer I give can be borrowed by an Objectivist, as it does not presuppose my own interpretation. So, I do not think that the *epistemological* problem is the main problem for Spinoza on these readings. I take the *metaphysical* problem mentioned in the body of this chapter to be unresolvable by Objectivists.

¹⁷ See Chapter 3.

cannot understand his theory of God's attributes, at least if the God's Perspective Interpretation is correct.

Why, then, would any charitable reader adopt a God's Perspective Interpretation? Shouldn't we, upon seeing these obvious inconsistencies, suspect that *we* are confused about Spinoza's metaphysics?

I suspect that a defender of a God's Perspective Interpretation, especially the Objective Interpretation, will appeal to the "overwhelming" textual case in favor of their interpretation.¹⁸ It is largely taken for granted that Spinoza, whether explicitly or implicitly, *says* that he believes in the problematic doctrines I've alluded to. "Perhaps Spinoza's theory would be more plausible if he accepted that God is wholly cognizable by humans, but he *says* quite the opposite," they might say. "Though it is important to charitably interpret Spinoza, we cannot ignore the fact that his text *mandates* a God's Perspective Interpretation."

In this paper, I will argue that this supposed textual mandate is an illusion. Spinoza's text is consistent with an alternative interpretation, which I call the Human Perspective Interpretation. On this interpretation, Spinoza took God to be wholly cognizable by human beings. God's only attributes, therefore, are the ones that *humans* cognize: Thought and Extension.

In the following textual analysis, I have tried to identify every text that seems to mandate a God's Perspective Interpretation, especially the Objective Interpretation. In each case, I will argue that the text (or collection of texts) fails to mandate the God's Perspective Interpretation because either (1) the God's Perspective reading of the text is implausible or

¹⁸ See especially Melamed (forthcoming), but also Haserot. I should note that post-Haserot and Gueroult, no interpreters I'm aware of endorse the Subjective Interpretation. I will give the textual evidence against it here mainly to distinguish it from the Human Perspective Interpretation and to give an exhaustive textual analysis.

(2) the text is consistent with the Human Perspective Interpretation.¹⁹ My ultimate aim in this paper is *not* to show that the text *mandates* the Human Perspective Interpretation, only to show that regarding the texts, it is at least as plausible an interpretation God's Perspective Interpretation.

I will consider a variety of sources of textual evidence. In some cases, I will point to direct evidence, like an instance where Spinoza seems to explicitly commit to a doctrine that is inconsistent with my interpretation. In others, I will construct indirect arguments based on texts related to but not strictly a part of the theory of the attributes.

The following analysis is divided into three sections, each corresponding to the three relevant collections of textual evidence for this interpretative dispute. The first section asks whether the text says that theory of the attributes is a theory of how *we* understand God *or* how *God* understands God. The second asks whether Spinoza's commitment to the "infinity" of God's attributes is consistent with God's having only two. The third asks whether Spinoza's use of the phrase "other attributes" in various texts amounts to a commitment to "their" existence.

Before I jump into the textual analysis, let me clarify the core doctrines that divide the God's Perspective and Human Perspective Interpretations' accounts of Spinoza's metaphysics.

¹⁹ I mean to use the inclusive "or" here. In many cases, the God's Perspective reading is implausible *and* the Human Perspective Reading is plausible.

2. God's Perspective vs. Human Perspective Interpretations

We can divide the interpretations at play here based on their interpretation of two definitions that are central to Spinoza's theory of the attributes.

2.1. The Definition of "Attribute"

1D4: By **attribute** I understand what intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.²⁰

There are three ambiguities in 1D4 that interest us here.²¹

1. Which "intellect" is being referred to here?
2. Is the perception of God's essence accurate or misguided?
3. For whom is "attribute" being defined?

2.1.1. Which Intellect?

There are three ways we could understand "intellect" in Spinoza's definition of "attribute."

First, "intellect" could be referring to God's intellect. The attributes, then, are what God perceives of God's own essence. This is the reading given by the Objective Interpretation: our perception of God's attributes is accurate because it aligns with God's own perception of God's attributes. Second, "intellect" could refer to the human intellect *and not God's*. In other words, the attributes are what *we* perceive of God's essence, but God does not perceive

²⁰ I depart from Curley's translation slightly here. Curley includes the English article "the" alongside "intellect," which might suggest that the attributes are what a single intellect (presumably God's, given his Objectivism) perceives of substance. Removing the article (which is of course not present in the Latin) leaves open the possibility that "intellect" is left as referring neutrally to *any* intellect.

²¹ Haserot points out three ambiguities, the first two of which are included here. Haserot (501-502) also notes that one can read the Latin as "By attribute I understand that which the intellect, as constituting the essence of substance, perceives of substance." I do not mention this ambiguity because Haserot rightly argues that it would be incoherent: an intellect (a mode) cannot be the essence of substance.

God's essence as constituted by those attributes. This is the reading given by the Subjective Interpretation.²² Finally, we could understand "intellect" as not being tacitly specified as belonging either just to God or just to humans. On this reading, the attributes are what *any* intellect (including both God's and ours) perceives of God's essence. However, the focal meaning of "intellect" is the human intellect, which picks up the essences of God in adequate ideas. The Human Perspective Interpretation adopts this reading for reasons that will become clearer in Section 2.1.3.

2.1.2. Is the "perception" accurate?

One's interpretative choice among the "intellects" discussed in 2.1.1. will partially determine one's interpretative choice about the accuracy of the intellect's perception. The ambiguity over the accuracy of "intellect's" perception of God's essence is partially an ambiguity of the Latin word *tanquam* that Spinoza uses in 1D4. Spinoza writes, "*intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens.*" *Tanquam* can be translated either as "as" or as "as if" in English, with the former implying accuracy and the latter implying illusion.

According to the Subjective Interpretation, *tanquam* is to be translated "as if" because the human intellect's perception of God's essence does *not* align with God's perception of God's essence. The attributes are perceived "as if" they belong to God, but "really" they do

²² As we see in Haserot, the choice of "intellect" is largely motivated by whether or not believes that God has more than two attributes. If God has more than the humanly cognizable attributes, 1D4 must be read with the "infinite intellect" reading. Wolfson, however, motivates the Subjective reading along both textual and historical grounds (v.1, 112-21, 142-57). Apart from the textual grounds discussed in this chapter, Wolfson argues that the "human intellect only" reading is required by the apparent inconsistency of God having more than two "objective" attributes and being simple (1P12, 1P13). Wolfson worries (rightly) that we cannot reconcile the "real distinction" between attributes with their identity with a simple substance. His solution is to argue that the "attributes" are just different names for God that do not adequately capture God's essence. Wolfson takes this interpretative decision to be licensed by a thread he sees from medieval Jewish philosophers like Maimonides and Crescas to Spinoza. The latter connection is also explored in Melamed (2014). I will not address this apparent historical case for God's Perspective Interpretations because it will be far less convincing if Spinoza's text can be shown to be consistent with a Human Perspective Interpretation.

not. According to the Objective Interpretation, *tanquam* is to be translated as “as,” because God’s intellect is not subject to illusion.

The Human Perspective Interpretation likewise adopts the “as” translation of *tanquam*, but not for the reasons that the Objectivist might give. On this interpretation, the accuracy of the intellect’s perception is not grounded in aligning God’s own perception. Instead, the claim is that the attributes are what the intellect perceives of the essence of God, *when the intellect is perceiving things adequately*. The accuracy of the intellect amounts to intrinsic features of its ideas: *when* the intellect has a clear and distinct idea of God, it perceives God’s essence as consisting in certain attributes. Because, on this interpretation, Spinoza believes that we cannot transcend our own perspective to “check” whether or not this perception aligns with God’s, there is no sense to be made of the further claim that God’s essence “really” is constituted by those attributes because these attributes are distinct only by reason from the substance.²³

2.1.3. For whom is “attribute” being defined?

The former two ambiguities have been explored by previous commentators and typically frame the debates of Spinoza’s theory of the attributes among scholars wedded to some version of a God’s Perspective Interpretation. However, it seems to me that there is a more general ambiguity about 1D4 introduced not by Spinoza, but by his contemporary readers.

Who is the intended audience for this definition? That is, from whose perspective are we supposed to understand this elaboration of the notion of an attribute? God’s or ours? This

²³ I defend the claim that the attributes are only conceptually distinct from substance in Chapter 2. On the interpretation I give there, a substance is strictly speaking identical with its attributes, following Nelson’s (2013) “Identity Interpretation” of Descartes’ theory of the attributes. This contrasts with “Objective” interpretations of Descartes (from Nolan (1997)) and Spinoza (Melamed (2013)) on which conceptual distinctions mark distinctions in “aspects” of God and therefore on which God is not strictly identical to God’s attributes.

might seem to be a strange question, but it is absolutely essential to understanding Spinoza's text.

For example, imagine that the "intellect" to refer to God's infinite intellect. It is ambiguous whether Spinoza means "God's intellect" as *God* understands it or as *we* understand it. From *our* perspective, God's intellect must include the attributes that our intellect understands God to have. However, we cannot make sense of the claim (or at least I argue elsewhere that we cannot), that that God's intellect contains attributes that we cannot understand. It would be nonsensical for us to say otherwise. So, when Spinoza refers to "God's intellect" here, he might mean "God's intellect, insofar as we understand it."

The same is true of "perception" here. If we understand that perception to be accurate, it must be "accurate" in terms that *we* can understand. Because we cannot, on the Human Perspective Interpretation, transcend our own perspective, we cannot judge the accuracy of our perceptions from God's perspective. The "accuracy" is to be judged in terms of the clarity and distinctness of ideas in the human intellect.

Those interpreting 1D4 with a God's Perspective Interpretation in mind must be imagining that 1D4 describes God's essence from that infinite vantage. So, terms like "intellect" and "perception" are to be understood as God understands them. This is behind the God's Perspective Idea that *our* perceptions of God's essence are only accurate insofar as they correspond to God's own perceptions. It is crucial to note that this leaves open the possibility that there is a cleft between God's perception and our own. In other words, "attribute" might refer to constituents of God's essence that no human can perceive.

We can divide the God's Perspective Interpretations along these lines. On the Subjective Interpretation, this definition suggests that from God's perspective, humans

misperceive God's real essence. On the Objective Interpretation, this definition suggests that God understands humans to be fortunate enough to *partially* perceive God's essence in terms of just two attributes. However, God *also* understands that the perception is not comprehensive with respect to attributes.

2.2. The Definition of "God"

Strictly speaking, one's disambiguation of the definition of "attribute" does not settle an equally important interpretative question: how many attributes does God have? One's answer to that question requires one to adopt one of two interpretations of 1D6, Spinoza's definition of "God."

1D6: By **God** I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of infinite attributes [*infinitis attributis*], of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.

There is some ambiguity in the Latin here. In Curley's translation, "*infinitis attributis*" is translated as "an infinity of attributes," suggesting that "infinite" tacitly describes a collection or quantity of attributes. However, one can also give a reading of "*infinitis attributis*" on which "infinite" is an adjective modifying "attribute," suggesting that the attributes themselves are each infinite. In 4.1.1, I will defend the latter reading.

On what I'll refer to as the Numerosity Interpretation, "infinite" is used to describe the quantity of attributes and means "infinitely many" or "more than can be counted by any finite number." On this interpretation, God has not only more attributes than just Thought and Extension, but also more attributes than can be represented by any humanly cognizable quantity. This of course entails that God has more than two attributes.

Opposing this interpretation is what I'll call the Totality Interpretation. The Totality Interpretation adopts the adjectival reading of "infinite," so that God is described as a being with attributes that are themselves infinite and express infinite essences. This reading of 1D6 does not understand it to make any commitment whatsoever to the amount of attributes God has.

Furthermore, on this interpretation, "infinite" is understood to be the negation of "finite." And, on this reading, "finite" is used to express the idea that something is limited in some way. A "finite" length of rope is limited by its being frayed, for instance; a "finite" span of time has a beginning and an end. To say that something is infinite is to deny limitation of it. On the Totality Interpretation, then, 1D6 defines God as a being that *is not limited* with respect to the attributes. Put conditionally, if something is an attribute, then it is an attribute of God. Again, this does not entail anything about the number of attributes that God has. If "attribute" refers to Thought and Extension, then God could have "infinite" attributes and still have two.

It is clear from the definition of these two interpretations that the Human Perspective Interpretation must adopt the Totality Interpretation. However, the Totality Interpretation is consistent with the God's Perspective Interpretations since it says nothing about whether God's having two attributes would count as a "limitation." Those who adopt both the Objective and Totality Interpretations will have to provide additional textual evidence that Spinoza was committed to the existence of "other attributes." This evidence will be considered in Section 5.

2.3. Deciding between these Interpretations

To determine which interpretation best makes sense of Spinoza's text, we need to answer the following questions.

1. Does "intellect" in Spinoza's definition of "attribute" refer only to the infinite intellect?
2. Does "intellect" in that definition refer only to the finite intellect?
3. Is the "perception" referred to in that definition inaccurate?
4. Does Spinoza's text require the Numerosity Interpretation?
5. Does Spinoza's text commit him to the existence of humanly uncognizable attributes?

A "yes" answer to any of the following would suggest that the Human Perspective Interpretation is inconsistent with Spinoza's text. It would require us to answer "God's" to the ultimate question of this chapter—from whose perspective is the *Ethics* to be understood?

Obviously, "yes" answers to some of these questions will require "yes" answers to others, so the division among questions is somewhat artificial. However, for clarity's sake, I will examine textual evidence for both the "yes" and "no" answers to each question in as much isolation from answers to other questions as possible.

3. The "Intellect" in the Definition of Attribute

3.1. Does "intellect" refer to only the infinite intellect?

It is *prima facie* implausible that Spinoza meant 1D4 to refer to the infinite intellect alone. Spinoza does not modify *intellectus* with *infinitus* in the definition of "attribute." In fact, he never defines, characterizes, or employs the notion of "attribute" with an explicit reference to the infinite intellect.

As far as I can tell, Spinoza only ever refers to the infinite intellect explicitly with the *infinitus* modifier. There does not appear to be a case in the 102 instances of “intellect” in the *Ethics* where Spinoza uses “*intellectus*” and can only mean “infinite intellect” in the relevant context. Given that “*intellectus*” appears over a hundred times, I cannot discuss each of these cases individually. However, if I’m right, then the text is compatible with reading “*intellectus*” as referring to both God’s and the human intellect unless otherwise specified.

There are cases where Spinoza uses “*intellectus*” and clearly *must* be referring to the finite intellect, suggesting that the focal reference of “*intellectus*” is the human intellect, the intellect of the reader. For example, Spinoza often distinguishes between the intellect and the imagination and how they regard God.²⁴ However, it is clear that God does not have an imagination for Spinoza (1App), so it would be nonsensical for him to contrast the infinite intellect and an infinite imagination. It would be similarly nonsensical to talk about the intellect’s capacity to release humans from bondage via its ability to restrain the affects given that God has no affects for Spinoza.²⁵ This does not entail that “*intellectus*” refers *exclusively* to the finite intellect, and such a claim is not necessitated by the Human Perspective Interpretation in any case.

It does entail, however, that who prefer the interpretation of “*intellectus*” on which it is tacitly modified cannot assume that “*intellectus*” refers to the infinite intellect throughout

²⁴ See the 1P15s discussion of the ways we can conceive Extension; the 1App discussion of the benighted imaginative God and its opposition to the intellectual conception of God offered in Part I; 1P40c’s discussion of the perfection of the intellect;

²⁵ See Part V of the *Ethics*, which is clearly aimed at relieving *human* suffering. See especially 5P42d’s explicit mention of “human power” consisting in “the intellect.”

the *Ethics*. They will have to find a non-arbitrary way to delineate the two forms of usage and explain why Spinoza invites a crucial ambiguity in the fourth definition of his masterwork.

Melamed has argues that Spinoza's apparent gloss on 1D4 at 2P7s requires the "infinite" reading (2017, 95). Spinoza writes,

Before we proceed further, we must recall here what we showed [NS: in the First Part], viz. that whatever can be perceived by an infinite intellect as constituting an essence of substance pertains to one substance only, and consequently that the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that.²⁶

Melamed argues that Spinoza "rephrases" 1D4 by saying that the "intellect" is the infinite intellect.

This objection relies on an awkward reading of the text. It is difficult to determine what specific demonstration Spinoza is referring to in Part I of the *Ethics* that "shows" that the attributes belong to one substance only. The most natural reading is 1P10s, where Spinoza argues that we cannot conclude that because the attributes are "really distinct"—they are conceived only through themselves—that they belong to distinct substances. However, in 1P10, only the unmodified form of *intellectus* is used. In fact, there is no reference to the *infinite* intellect in the *Ethics* until 1P16. It would be a striking flaw in the geometrical presentation of the *Ethics* to help oneself to the existence of something that has not yet been proven to exist.

Spinoza does prove later at 1P30 that the *infinite* intellect must comprehend the attributes because *any* intellect, whether finite or infinite, must comprehend the attributes.

²⁶ All underlining in the paper is mine.

Here Spinoza argues that when an intellect has a true idea, the object of that idea must exist “in Nature.” This is another way of esteeming the intellect’s relation to truth. Then, he argues that “in Nature” there is only God and its modes. From this, Spinoza concludes that *any* intellect comprehends the attributes.

However, this text suggests that intellect’s finitude or infinitude is not what determines whether it has true ideas that are of things “in Nature.” It is the fact that it is an *intellect* is having those ideas that guarantees their truth. So, it is of course true of the infinite intellect that it comprehends God’s attributes. And we know that those attributes belong to only one substance from previous proofs. So, we have “*shown*” that what the infinite intellect perceives of the essence of substance, namely the attributes, belong to only one substance.

Given that Spinoza does not make a direct reference to any of the propositions mentioned here in the passage from 2P7s, we cannot be absolutely sure whether he had 1P30 or 1P10 in mind. However, on my reading, Spinoza does not, strictly speaking, *show* that the *infinite* intellect comprehends the attributes until 1P30, so he cannot just be referring to 1P10. But if that’s the case, then Spinoza is referring to what he “showed” in two propositions in the previous part of the *Ethics* and not clarifying what he meant by 1D4. This is consistent with the Human Perspective Interpretation.

Some interpreters have argued that we must choose the “infinite intellect” reading because the “any intellect” reading is inconsistent with the existence of the “other attributes.” Haserot (503) argues that we are forced to read the “*intellectus*” as referring to the infinite intellect because otherwise Spinoza’s definition would be incoherent. The finite human intellect conceives of only two attributes, Thought and Extension (2A5, 2P1, 2P2, 1P10). According to Haserot, Spinoza believes that there are infinitely many more attributes than

Thought and Extension (e.g., 1P9, 2P7s). Therefore, there are more than two attributes. In this case, the definition would mean that something only counts as an attribute if it is perceived by the finite intellect. This would be a blatant inconsistency on Spinoza's part, since it would suggest that the "other attributes" are not attributes after all. However, this argument simply pushes the question back a step to the question of whether there are more attributes than Thought and Extension. Independent evidence will have to be given to justify this reading of the text.

In conclusion, Spinoza does not seem to *define* "attribute" as *only* what the infinite intellect perceives of God's essence. In fact, it seems more reasonable to conclude that *intellectus*' unmodified usage in the text is meant to any intellect unless specified otherwise. This is consistent with the Human Perspective Interpretation.

3.2. Does "intellect" refer to only the finite intellect?

The texts cited in 3.1 do not warrant the conclusion that the attributes are defined in terms of what only the finite intellect perceives of God's essence. Indeed, Spinoza never defines or characterizes the attributes in a way that suggests their mere existence in the finite mind. In addition, at 1P30, Spinoza demonstrates that the infinite intellect *also* "comprehends" God's attributes, suggesting that "attribute" cannot be defined to exclude God's perception of God's own essence. Any textual evidence for the Subjective reading of "*intellectus*" must be in the form of suggestions that the attributes are illusory and thus confined to the finite intellect.

3.3. Is the "perception" referred to in that definition inaccurate?

Spinoza never explicitly suggests that the attributes are in any sense illusory. Instead, Spinoza often claims that the attributes give us adequate, non-illusory ideas of God's

essence. First, Spinoza is clear that it is the *intellect* that perceives the essence of God in 1D4, not the imagination. This suggests immediately that the attributes cannot be the result of imaginative activity. 2P44 tells us that the intellect, unlike the imagination, represents things truly. This is encoded in Spinoza's division of the three kinds of knowledge. The first kind of knowledge, which does not give us an adequate idea of God, relies on the device of words to help us recollect things, much like Wolfson thinks that the attributes do on account of their being universals. The second and third kinds, however, *do* give us adequate ideas and each involve the activity of the intellect as opposed to the imagination. All of this suggests that the attributes are not best conceived of as imaginative illusions of some kind: they are objective rather than subjective.

And, to repeat the claim of 1P30, the attributes appear to be understood by the infinite intellect as well. How could God have a "true idea" (1P30d) of God via the attributes if the attributes are mere illusions?

3.4. Summary

The texts discussed in 3.1-3.3 are consistent with the reading of 1D4 given by the Human Perspective Interpretation. The attributes are what intellect, that is *any* intellect, *accurately* perceives of God's essence. I do not want to make the stronger claim that they require the Human Perspective reading because God's Perspective Interpreters can point to another class of texts to resist including the finite intellect in the definition of "attribute." If the text requires Spinoza to believe that God perceives attributes distinct from Thought and Extension, then the reading I want to give of 1D4 would be incoherent.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will deal only with the illusion of a textual mandate for the Objective Interpretation.

4. The “Infinity” of God’s Attributes

4.1. Direct Textual Evidence against the Numerosity Interpretation

The Totality Interpretation gives a uniform reading of “infinite” throughout Spinoza’s corpus. On this interpretation, Spinoza intends to express the *unlimitedness* of God’s essence when he describes God and his attributes as infinite.

By contrast, supporters of the Numerosity Interpretation (or at least those that take Spinoza’s use of “infinite” to itself express a notion implying numerosity) take at least some of Spinoza’s uses of “infinite” to entail that God has more attributes than any finite number could count. As we will see, it is not obvious that the Numerosity Interpretation can give a uniform reading of “infinite” throughout the *Ethics* because this reading would make some of Spinoza’s claims either inconsistent or incoherent.

In this section, I will not attempt to discuss every usage of “infinite” in Spinoza’s corpus, nor will I discuss a majority of those usages.²⁷ Instead, I will focus on core texts that seem to mandate the Numerosity Interpretation and argue that the Totality Interpretation gives a much more reasonable account of those texts.

4.1.1. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Uses of “Infinite”

Before I turn to particular texts, however, it will be useful to make an initial note about Spinoza’s use of “infinite” in the relevant contexts. One would expect that, on the Numerosity Interpretation, Spinoza would say explicitly and perhaps in various contexts that there is an infinite number/quantity/count/etc. of attributes. That is, one would expect Spinoza to use “infinite” as an adjective to describe something, roughly, that can be

²⁷ My treatment here does much supplementation of the ones given by Bennett, Kline, and Wolf.

quantified or counted. However, in his discussion of God's infinity and the infinity of the attributes, Spinoza *never* uses "infinite" in this way. Instead, he modifies "God" or "attribute" *directly*. This is despite the fact Spinoza is happy to mention infinite quantities in other contexts, albeit derisively (1P15) and when he uses of the substantive *infinita* (infinite things) to express the thought that the class of some kind of thing is unlimited, where being "unlimited" indicates that "everything" falls under that class (1P16).

So, if the Numerosity Interpretation is correct, it must assume that Spinoza systematically omitted terminology that would make it clear to his reader that what is being described as infinite is the *class*, *collection*, or *quantity* of attributes and not the attributes themselves, considered individually. Another way of putting it is that the Numerosity Interpretation must assume that, at least in some cases, Spinoza is tacitly describing something *extrinsic* to the attributes, such as their count, when he predicates "infinity" of them, as opposed to their *intrinsic* features. While this interpretation might be suggested by the economy of using the expression "infinite attributes" as opposed to "an infinite collection/quantity/number of attributes," there are no texts where Spinoza makes use of the less economical and clearer expression in the context of the attributes.

The Numerosity Interpretation cannot give a uniform reading of "infinite" as something extrinsic. That's because Spinoza clearly has the intrinsic, non-counting usage in mind in many cases, for instance, when he describes substance, the infinite intellect, infinite modes, and God's infinite idea (1P8, 1P16, 1P21, 1P22, Ep64, 2P8).

This also seems to be the case in Spinoza's definition of God. On the Numerosity Interpretation, we must read 1D6's claim that God has infinite attributes to be a claim about the amount of attributes God has, as opposed to a claim about the attributes themselves.

However, the explication of 1D6 shows this to be a possibly incoherent reading. Spinoza writes,

I say absolutely infinite, not infinite in its own kind; for if something is only infinite in its own kind, we can deny infinite attributes of it [NS: (i.e., we can conceive infinite attributes which do not pertain to its nature)]; but if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence.

This is incoherent on a uniformly extrinsic reading of “infinite.” For Spinoza would mean we can deny infinitely many attributes of a being that is infinite only in its own kind. This is impossible: we can conceive only two attributes, and in any case, our intellects are finite and unable to think of infinitely many things.

On the intrinsic reading of infinite, this explication is perfectly coherent. The claim is that we can deny infinite attributes, that is attributes which are themselves infinite, of something that is infinite only in its own kind. For example, we could deny the infinite attribute of Thought of a substance that has only the infinite attribute of Extension. To say that God has “infinite attributes” is to say that God has attributes, each of which is infinite and to say that God is “absolutely infinite” is to say that God has “every” attributes. This is why Spinoza goes on to say that “whatever expresses essence and involves no negation” pertains to God’s essence.

The natural response here might be to reject the claim that the Numerosity Interpretation requires a uniformly extrinsic reading of “infinite.” But if that is the case, then the Numerosity Interpretation must find a non-ad hoc way of delimiting the cases where Spinoza wants to describe the uncountable quantity of the attributes and the cases where he describes something as intrinsically infinite.

As several interpreters have suggested in their analyses of the infinite in Spinoza's philosophy, it is useful to start with Spinoza's own discussion of the proper and improper ways of thinking about the infinite and then to keep that discussion in mind when analyzing the use of the relevant terms in the *Ethics*. The assumption is that Spinoza's explicit thoughts about the infinite ought to be borne out when he expresses theses about, for example, substance.

4.1.2. The “Infinite” in the Imagination versus the Intellect

The clearest explicit discussion of the infinite is in Letter 12 to Lodewijk Meyer (also known as the “Letter on the Infinite”), though his thoughts here are clearly echoed in his discussion of infinite and quantity at 1P15s. Spinoza begins his discussion of the infinite in the letter by making some crucial distinctions, since he believes that many of the puzzles and paradoxes generated by the notion of the infinite result from muddles about the many ideas that can correspond to our uses of the term “infinite” and related terms. Here are the relevant divisions:

Infinite in virtue of definition or essence	Infinite in virtue of cause
Unlimited, that is, not explicable by number	Infinite because its parts cannot be explicated by a number
The infinite we apprehend only by the intellect	The infinite that can also be apprehended by imagination

Table 1: Spinoza's Division of “Infinite”

The primary division that is useful for our purposes is the division between the apprehension of the infinite by the intellect alone versus the apprehension of the infinite by the intellect with the imagination serving as an aid or by the imagination alone. It is clear throughout the letter that Spinoza takes the imagination's attempts to apprehend the infinite to cause a variety of philosophical mishaps, including paradoxes akin to Zeno's (IV/55/13). The

essential failure of the imagination to apprehend the infinite appears to be its essential reliance on what Spinoza calls “beings of reason (*entia rationis*)” (IV/57/18). Examples of these “modes of imagination,” include time (that is, thinking of duration as “composed of [discrete] moments”), measure, and number (IV/57/8). To be fair to the imagination, as Spinoza makes clear elsewhere, these modes of imagination are useful insofar as they help us remember, classify, and explain things (CM, I/234/1-28). However, Spinoza denies that they can help us get clear and distinct ideas of the infinite.

To illustrate, we can consider how these two ways of conceiving the infinite, represented by the two columns in our table, give us different ways of conceiving different parts of Spinoza’s ontology.

The Intellect	The Imagination
Substance, properly conceived	Modes improperly conceived “in separation of” substance or as finite substances
Eternity	Duration confused with Time divided artificially into seconds, minutes, etc.
Quantity, properly conceived, as infinite, indivisible, and one alone	Quantity, abstractly conceived, as being composed of parts, finite, manifold
Measure and number “inapplicable without manifest contradiction”	Measure and number as “mental constructs” or “modes of the imagination”

Table 2: How We Conceive the Infinite

To illustrate, consider Spinoza’s discussion of the two ways that we might regard Duration, which Spinoza regards as infinite. He writes that the imagination confuses Duration with Time, by which Spinoza means the division of something infinite, namely Duration, into an arbitrary class of measurable quantities: hours, minutes, and seconds. Spinoza argues that if we regard Duration in this way, we quickly find ourselves in paradoxes about the passage of time. If, for example, time is conceived as infinitely divisible, one might worry how any time

could pass because passage would require a temporal traversal of an infinite number of moments (Ep 12, IV/55/13).

So, what appears to be essential to the imaginative conception of the infinite is the imagination's use of division and delimitation of the infinite into finite parts that are thought to compose that thing. The essential trouble with this method of conceiving the infinite is that, on Spinoza's conception of the infinite, there's no sense in which the finite products of imaginative analysis (numbers, moments, and so on) can "add up" to form a clear representation of the infinite. The imagination is doomed to badly represent the infinite as unlimited, indivisible, and unique, because the imagination must rely on devices that are finite.

This fact is borne out in Spinoza's comments on number in the same letter. Spinoza argues that number results from "separat[ing] the affections of Substance from Substance itself, and arrang[ing] them in classes so that we can easily imagine them as far as possible..." (IV/57/3). That is, numbers represent the count of items that fall into a class. It is natural that we are doomed to fail to represent the infinite with numbers because any numbers "delimit" what they are representing: that is, they establish some specific, finite count for those items.²⁸

Spinoza notes elsewhere (CM I/235/10-29) that we often attempt to use number to represent the idea that there are more items in a class than we have ideas of, but the use of number in that way is essentially confused. For example, having ideas of three or four humans, we might form the idea of there being seven billion with the use of the numeral

²⁸ This also assumes that the "attributes" can fall into a class. In Chapter 3, I argue that there cannot be a "class" of attributes. This is because attributes "have nothing in common" with one another and thus cannot belong to a class of similar entities (e.g., 1P2, 1P10s, 1A5).

“7,000,000,000.” However, Spinoza is clear that this method of conceiving unconceived items under a common class is an important source of philosophical error.²⁹ It is reasonable to think that the same considerations would apply to attributes: we cannot adequately represent the supposed fact that there are more than two attributes by conceiving of some numeral higher than two and appending it to an imaginative representation of the class of attributes.

These comments on division of the proper and improper ways of conceiving the infinite suggests that there is something essentially confused (in Spinoza’s sense) about the Numerosity Interpretation. That’s because the notion of “infinite number,” on Spinoza’s view, is essentially confused and even “manifestly contradictory” (Ep 12, IV/59/14). This is to be expected: the imagination is an essentially finite faculty and so cannot form infinitely many ideas (e.g., 2P40s1, 4D6). By extension, to represent the attributes as having infinite numerosity is (1) to employ an imaginative aid (number) when a clear conception of the attributes requires the infinite to conceive them without the imagination’s help and (2) is to make the crucial mistake of attempting to trespass the bounds of the finite imagination.

Of course, the natural response on behalf of supporters of the Numerosity Interpretation might be that these considerations are not only compatible with their view, but that they appear to mandate it. In other words, the response might be that the only-two attribute supporter is guilty of *finitizing* the attributes by claiming that there are only two.³⁰ In fact, there are so many attributes, the response might go, that they *cannot be counted* because any count will improperly represent them as belonging to a finite class. God’s “unlimitedness” entails that it has uncountably many attributes.

²⁹ See especially (TIE 87-90, II/32/35-I/33/33) and Spinoza’s discussion of “Transcendental” terms at 2P40s2.

³⁰ See e.g. Melamed’s (2018, 13) discussion of 1P9.

But this response misunderstands Spinoza's essential point. The idea is that applications of imaginative devices like number essentially involve dividing substance into parts, which is at direct odds with Spinoza's repeated insistence that substance is undivided.³¹ The Human Perspective Interpretation does not include the view that God is somehow *divided* into two distinct parts or aspects corresponding to the attributes. The view is that while those attributes are conceivable in isolation from one another, which makes them really distinct in an epistemological sense, they are not really distinct in the metaphysical sense (1P10s). The view is that "God has two attributes" is the view that God can be conceived to be thinking and extended. It is natural to speak of God's having "two attributes", because, as Spinoza notes, it can be useful for categorization and memory to represent things with the aid of the imagination. But strictly speaking, the intellect does not represent substance as being divided in any way and any perceived division (including one into a massive number of different attributes) is the product of confused, imaginative thinking.

So, if God or God's attributes are uncountable, it must be because counting them would be attempting to conceive them with the use of an imaginative aid. Properly speaking, however, God's infinity should not be regarded this way.³² This is why the Totality

³¹ This is echoed in Spinoza's discussion of God's immensity in (CM II/iii, I/254/8-22) wherein he writes that those who assume God is "quantitative" are committing an absurdity because, prefiguring 1P15s, they derive this mistake from misunderstanding the properties of extension. Spinoza goes as far as to say that God's immensity cannot be understood in a quantitative sense.

³² This discussion of Letter 12 is indebted to Joachim (27-35)'s discussion of Spinoza on the infinite. For example, Joachim writes,

Every measured, every time, and every number are finite—measure, time, and number are applicable only to what can be 'pictured' as well as 'thought': infinity belongs only to what can be thought and not pictured. The infinite is that which has no limits...The true infinite cannot have its nature expressed in number or measure at all (34-5).

Interpretation reads Spinoza's use of "infinite" in the uniform, proper sense, namely as being "unlimited."

4.1.3. Texts that Support the Totality Interpretation

In addition to Letter 12, there are a variety of texts that support the Totality Interpretation. Many of them have been offered by Bennett (75-79) and Kline in support of the Totality Interpretation. I will discuss them briefly here for the sake of completeness.

In many texts, Spinoza suggests that "infinite" can be glossed as "every" or "all." We can see this at 1P16, "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)"; at 1P17s "But I think I have shown clearly enough (see P16) that from God's supreme power, *or* infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things"; at 1D6e, "if something is absolutely infinite, everything [quicquid] that expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence"; and 2P3d, "For God (by P1) can think infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, *or* (what is the same, by IP16) can form the idea of his essence and of all the things which necessarily follow from it."³³

This gloss is present in other text. In the Part I, Chapter II of the Short Treatise, Spinoza gives a version of 1D6 that reads, "God is, we say, a being of which all, or infinite, attributes are predicated" (I/19/5-6). This is echoed later in that chapter: "From all of these it follows that of Nature all in all is predicated, and that thus Nature consists of infinite attributes, of which each is perfect in its kind" (I/22/9-11).

³³ All underlining is mine.

In other texts, Spinoza suggests that “infinite” can be glossed as “unlimited” and “finite” as “limited.”. We can see this in the following texts: 1D2, “That thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature”; 1P8d, “But not as finite. For then (by D2) it would have to be limited by something else of the same nature”; 1P8s, “Since being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature, it follows from P7 alone that every substance must be infinite”; and 1P21d, 1P28, 2D7, where Spinoza takes something’s being finite as entailing that it has a “determinate existence.”

Spinoza also seems to equate something’s being finite with its being a part, suggesting that being infinite implies being whole. For example, see 1P13s, “That substance is indivisible, is understood more simply merely from this, that the nature of substance cannot be conceived unless as infinite, and that by a part of substance nothing can be understood except a finite substance, which (by P8) implies a plain contradiction” and 1P15s, “If corporeal substance is infinite, they say, let us conceive it to be divided in two parts. Each part will be either finite or infinite. If the former, then an infinite is composed of two finite parts, which is absurd.” This is also true in the aforementioned chapter of the Short Treatise. Spinoza writes, “But it is impossible that parts could be conceived in an infinite Nature, for all parts are, by their nature, finite” (I/25/17)

These texts suggest that “infinite” is equivalent to “unlimited” for Spinoza.

4.1.4. Are there Texts that Require the Numerosity Interpretation?

In this section, I will not review every time that Spinoza uses “infinite” in my critique of the Numerosity Interpretation. Instead, I will focus on texts that have been explicitly mentioned in defenses of the Numerosity Interpretation and those that ought to be, because they appear

initially to be at odds with the Totality Interpretation. My goal is to show that all of the texts are compatible with the only-two reading and some are even much more naturally read if we think of “infinite” as “unlimited.”

1.1.1.1 The Definition of “God”

Spinoza’s definition of God at 1D6 might be cited in support of the Numerosity Interpretation. Spinoza describes God as absolutely infinite, meaning that God has “infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence.” Here, it is natural to give the first use of infinite an extrinsic gloss, since Spinoza goes on to say that each attribute individually is intrinsically infinite. (A uniformly extrinsic usage would make this claim incoherent, see 4.1.1.) However, in the explication to this definition, Spinoza makes it clear that being absolutely infinite entails that one cannot “deny that [God] has infinite attributes” since “whatever expresses essence and does not involve negation belongs to its essence.” The opposition, then, between having infinite and finite attributes is the opposition between having everything that expresses essence and lacking some essence. In other words, between having unlimited attributes and lacking attributes. 1D6 therefore can be read as the claim that God lacks no attributes, as opposed to the claim that God has so many attributes that they cannot be counted.

Indeed, it’s far from clear that 1D6 could by itself express anything about how many or which attributes God has. Spinoza argues in 1P8s2 that definitions cannot, involve or express a fixed number of individuals, since it expresses nothing but the nature of the thing defined. For example, the definition of triangle expresses nothing other than simply the nature of the triangle, and not a fixed number of triangles.

The definition of God's infinity in terms of attributes, then, cannot by itself show that God has some count or even uncountably many attributes, just in the same way that a definition of a triangle cannot by itself show *a priori* that there are four or five or uncountably many triangles. It is much more natural, then, to understand 1D6 as amounting to the claim that God has *every* attribute.

Melamed challenges this reading of 1D6 (forthcoming, 8). He argues that the Totality Interpretation is incoherent because it cannot make sense of Spinoza's claim in the explication that "...if something is only infinite in its own kind, then we can deny infinite attributes of it..." His worry is that it cannot be the case that we can deny infinite (that is, all) attributes of, e.g., Extension (which is infinite in its own kind) because we would wind up denying Extension of Extension. However, this misunderstands the Totality reading and begs the question against its claim that Spinoza sometimes uses "infinite" to describe something's intrinsic nature and not its quantity. On this reading of 1D6Exp, the claim is that we can deny an infinite attribute of something that is only infinite in its own kind. So, Extension is infinite in its own kind because there is a sense in which we can deny Thought, an infinite attribute, of it.³⁴

Melamed's reading also has the awkward consequence of having Spinoza believe that we can conceive infinitely many attributes other than Thought and Extension. After the clarification he quotes, Spinoza goes on to say of a thing that is infinite in its own kind that "we can conceive infinite attributes which do not pertain to its nature." This is impossible

³⁴ This invites the question of whether there can be "finite attributes." The answer for Spinoza is presumably not. However, at this point of the *Ethics* it is likely that Spinoza is anticipating the objections and concerns of Cartesian readers, who will believe that there are finite substances with what might be called "finite attributes" that constitute their essences. Spinoza's demonstrations will rule out the possibility of finite substances eventually and so eventually the notion of a "finite attribute" will be otiose.

both because we cannot conceive other attributes (1P10, 2A5) and because we cannot conceive infinitely many things (e.g., 2P44).

Spinoza also seems to require a totality reading of “infinite” in 1D6 in order to establish monism. 1P8, which establishes the infinity of every substance (assuming nothing about whether there is more than one), includes the claim that a finite substance could not exist because it would be “limited by” another substance with the same attribute, which 1P5 rules out. And as Bennett notes, 1P14, the demonstration that God is the only substance, appears to rely on the “unlimited” and intrinsic reading of “infinite” as well (75). Spinoza again equates God’s absolute infinity with not lacking attributes. The demonstration is quite simple on the “unlimited” reading: since attributes are the means by which we distinguish among substances (1P5), if God has all of the attributes, then there cannot be more than one substance.

1.1.1.2 1P16

1P16 might seem to require the Numerosity Interpretation. Here, Spinoza writes that “[f]rom the necessity of the divine nature, there must follow infinite things (*infinita*) in infinite modes (*modis*).” It might be natural for us to think that 1P16 establishes that uncountably many “things” follow from the divine nature, and Curley’s translation of *infinitas* as “infinitely many things” is most naturally read in English as “more things than can be counted by a number.” And if this were the case, then there would be serious limitation to uniform “unlimited” reading.

There are several problems with this reading. First, Spinoza’s own clarification of *infinitas* as “everything” suggests the Totality Interpretation. Second, even if one adopted the Numerosity Interpretation, it’s not clear that 1P16 could be used to support the Objective

Interpretation: Spinoza claims here that infinite things follow from the “divine nature.”

However, the best candidates for what “divine nature” refers to are the attributes themselves (1P15). So, it may be that uncountably many things *follow* from each of the attributes, but that alone does not entail that there are uncountably many attributes.

The “unlimited” reading gives a much more natural and uniform reading of 1P16. On this reading, Spinoza argues that *every* mode follows from God’s attributes. Now, Spinoza is clear in 1P21 that finite modes cannot follow from the attributes directly because, according to that proposition, everything that follows from an attribute must itself be infinite. 1P21 and 1P22 show that strictly what follows from an attribute is an infinite mode of that attribute. These are the infinite modes (*modis*) of 1P16.³⁵ 1P16 suggests, then, that every mode either follows from an attribute directly or is “in” one of these directly-following infinite modes. The unlimited reading is uniform because while it must appeal to both an intrinsic and extrinsic sense of infinity, it keeps the core use of infinity as “unlimited” intact.

4.1.5. 1P9

At 1P9, Spinoza writes,

1P9 The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it.

³⁵ Curley worries with others here that “mode” may not be used in a technical sense here, but on the unlimited reading the technical sense is quite natural. In any case, neither choice presents a challenge for the view about the attributes under discussion.

Melamed has argued that 1P9 is inconsistent with God's having only two attributes on two counts (2017, 98-99).³⁶ First, Melamed claims that, if God has only two attributes, then 1P9 entails that humans and God are equally real because humans also "have" the attributes of Thought and Extension. But this is impossible, given that the former are finite and the latter is infinite. Second, if God has only two attributes, then God would not be as real as a being with three or more attributes. This is inconsistent with God's being the most real being. I will consider these arguments in turn.

The first argument assumes that human beings' status as modes of Thought and Extension entails that they "have" those attributes. But the word "have" must have different uses in the contexts of God's "having" an attribute and a human being's "having" an attribute. If by "have" one means that an attribute constitutes the *essence* of something, then it is clear that human beings do not "have" the two attributes of which they are modes. For one, humans are not substances and Spinoza reserves "attribute" for essences of substance (1D4). And indeed, Spinoza characterizes the essence of human beings with notions such as contingent existence (2P10), finitude (2P13), and the conatus doctrine (3P7). That's not to say that human beings are not *necessarily* thinking and extended things: they are certainly both. But as Spinoza's discussion of the superhuman attributes of God reveals, Spinoza distinguishes between necessary properties (or *propria*) of things and essential properties of things (KVI, ii, I/27/19-24). It is true that humans are necessarily thinking and extended things and (in an awkward sense) "have" the attributes of Thought and Extension, but this is irrelevant to 1P9.

³⁶See also Curley (1969, 152-3), Melamed (forthcoming, 12-3). One might also cite Ep 9, where Spinoza tells de Vries "the more reality or being a being has the more attributes must be attributed to it..." (IV/45/17-25)

The second argument misunderstands the comparative claim implicit in 1P9. Here, Spinoza claims that if and only if some substance x has more attributes than some substance y , then x is more real than y . But this comparative claim does not entail that God has some number of attributes. For example, it is compatible with the claim that a substance with Thought and Extension as attributes would be more real than a substance with just Thought. It might be true that *if* there were a substance with three attributes, it would be more real than a substance with two, but this is irrelevant if there are only two attributes for a substance to have. At most the comparative claim of 1P9 seems to establish that the most real being has *all* attributes, or that there is no being with *more* attributes than the most real being.³⁷ 1P9 cannot give independent evidence for the Numerosity Interpretation.

4.1.6. 1P8s2 – The Arbitrariness of “Two” Attributes

1P8s2 suggests that whenever there is a finite number of entities, there needs to be some explanation as to why there are *exactly* that many. According to 1P8s2,

From these premises, it follows that if a fixed number of individuals exists in Nature, there must necessarily be a cause why those individuals and not more or fewer exist. If, for example, in Nature twenty men were to exist [...] in order to account for the existence of these twenty men, it will not be enough for us to demonstrate the cause why not more or fewer than twenty men exist...

An Objectivist could argue that God’s having only two attributes is inexplicable and thus arbitrary. Why does God have two, rather than three, attributes? If one believes that God has

³⁷ Following Kline (347), Wolf (188-91), and Bennett (76-7). It should also be noted that, if we take Spinoza’s suspicion of number being applied to the infinite, we should suspect that 1P9 does not compare the *number* of attributes, but whether or not a substance *has* one of the attributes. A higher “degree” of reality means having more attributes; the “highest” degree means having *all* attributes.

an infinite number of attributes, then Spinoza's demand for an explanation at 1P8s2 seems inapplicable: it is the *finitude* of a number of individuals that demands explanation.

We should of course note that this text is only relevant if it is extended beyond its context. Here, it is clear that the "individuals" under discussion are modes since they are "in Nature" and have "external causes for their existence," neither of which can be predicated of attributes. Nevertheless, one might take this text to be an application of a more general principle: whenever there is a finite number of entities, there needs to be some explanation as to why there is *exactly* that number of entities.

It is not obvious that Spinoza can answer the question: why does God have two attributes, as opposed to some other number? As 1P8s makes clear, such an explanation cannot come from the definition of attribute or God as infinite substance, since "[n]o definition involves or expresses a fixed number of individuals." Furthermore, it's not clear what kind of explanation of the commitment to these two attributes is possible, given that any explanation would either require us to conceive attributes through one another or through something else. Spinoza blocks these options at 1P10, when he argues that attributes can only be conceived through themselves.

This argument misunderstands the Human Perspective Interpretation's claim that "Thought and Extension are the only attributes." Remember that on this interpretation, the attributes are defined as what *we* conceive of God's essence. And, according to 2P1, 2P2, and 2A5, we conceive of God's essence as being constituted by Thought and Extension and no other attribute. Since the "attributes" just are what *we* conceive of God's essence, it's not clear in what sense that it could be arbitrary that there *are* only two. There is no wider class of "attributes" to compare "our" attributes to. Because we cannot conceive of other attributes,

we cannot entertain the possibility that there could be other attributes in addition to the ones we perceive. In fact, the notion of “attributes other than the ones we perceive” is contradictory in the first place, since “attribute” is defined in terms of what *we do* perceive on the Human Perspective Interpretation.³⁸ This suggests that there is no need to *explain* the finitude of the class of attributes, because there is no genuine contrast between God’s having two versus God’s having three. There does not need to be a sufficient reason that a contradictory state of affairs does not obtain.

If one starts with an interpretation of 1D4 on which the attributes are what God conceives of God’s own essence, then it does appear arbitrary for an infinite being to conceive of its own essence as constituted by finitely many attributes. But this just begs the question against the Human Point of View Interpretation.³⁹

4.1.7. Conclusion

I’ve argued that Spinoza’s text does not mandate the Numerosity Interpretation. However, this does not suffice to show that there is no textual mandate for the Objective Interpretation, because God’s having *all* the attributes is consistent with God’s having more than two. One might defend the Objective Interpretation by pointing to texts where Spinoza appears to

³⁸ I defend this claim at length in Chapter 3.

³⁹ Along similar lines, one might claim that the existence of only two attributes is inconsistent with Spinoza’s adoption of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. For example, one might deny that there could be a sufficient reason as to why there are two and not three or twenty-eight attributes. There are two issues with this usage of the PSR. First, it begs the question by assuming that there are other attributes to have or lack. In other words, it is not arbitrary for God to have two attributes because those are all the attributes anything can have. Second, as Della Rocca notes, the PSR only suffices to show that God has at least two attributes (2011, 35-36). Even if one believed that the PSR entails a Principle of Plenitude, as Lovejoy (52, 151-57) does, or takes it to at least motivate such a Principle (as Lin (2017, 149-52) does), a Principle of Plenitude entails that God has *as many* attributes as can be had. This suggests that the PSR is consistent with God’s having “only” two attributes.

make explicit reference to “other attributes”. I will argue that each of these texts is consistent with Human Perspective Interpretation.

4.2. “Other Attributes”

4.2.1. 2P7s

By far, the most commonly cited text in support of the Objective Interpretation is 2P7s, the scholium to the proposition asserting Spinoza’s so-called “parallelism.” This text is often cited because Spinoza mentions that parallelism, while clearly obtaining between modes of Thought and Extension, also holds for “other attributes.” Here is the relevant text from Curley’s translation, which, as we will see, is friendly to the Objective Interpretation:

- (1) Therefore, whether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or *under any other attribute*, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes... (emphasis added)

And later in the scholium, Spinoza tells us that

- (2) I understand the same concerning *the* other attributes. (emphasis added)

We should first notice the way in which this translation prejudices the reader against the only-two attribute reading. In both emphasized sections, Spinoza appears (in English) to make direct reference to *the* other attributes using a definite article. However, as there are no articles (e.g., “the”) in the original Latin, this is as much an interpretative choice as it is a choice of translation. The original Latin reads:

- (1) ...ideò sive naturam sub attributo Extensionis, sive sub attributo Cogitationis, sive *sub alio* quocunque concipiamus... (emphasis added)
- (2) ...idem de *aliis attributis* intelligo. (emphasis added)

In neither case, is the addition of an article like “the” *mandated* by the Latin, though it might be inserted for ease of readability, if one adopts the Objective Interpretation. However, we can reasonably translate the two texts this way:

(1) Therefore, whether we conceive of nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or under *another* attribute...

(2) I understand the same concerning other attributes.

These translations, which conform to the Latin more directly, are without the suggestive direct reference to “the other attributes.” So, in other words, one cannot conclude from Spinoza’s own words that he wanted to refer to other attributes, thus suggesting that he is committed to their existence.⁴⁰

Still, one might reasonably ask why, on the Human Perspective Interpretation, Spinoza bothered to prove that parallelism holds even in case there are other attributes. It might be argued that these clarifications about the generality of the demonstration are strictly speaking unnecessary, if Extension and Thought are the only two attributes.

But here, we should reiterate what the claim that there are “only two” attributes amounts to. Spinoza never demonstrates a proposition *ruling out* that there are other attributes; he has only demonstrated that Thought and Extension *are* attributes. Indeed, it’s not clear that he could provide such a negative demonstration on the Human Perspective Interpretation. Such a demonstration would either have to be constructed from the range of ideas that Spinoza has access to, namely ideas of Thought and Extension and “nature” conceived through both independently. 1P10s suggests that Spinoza could not form the

⁴⁰ Melamed (2017, 90 n. 22) notes this point about the lack of articles when reading 1D4, but not 2P7s (forthcoming, 4)

relevant idea under the description “an attribute distinct from Thought and Extension” necessary to *deny* the existence of such a thing. Furthermore, the mere *lack* of a demonstration of other attributes is not suggestive of the *absence* of other attributes. To suggest that we could conclude that there are no other attributes because we aren’t presented with modes of them is to badly misunderstand the scope of conclusions that we can draw using *a priori* reasoning from the axioms of Part II. On this interpretation, we are permitted to neither affirm nor deny a commitment to “other attributes,” whatever inconceivable collection of things that description might attempt to latch onto.

Nevertheless, it is useful for, and characteristic of, Spinoza’s employment of geometrical reasoning to provide maximally general demonstrations when he can. For example, he tells us in 1P21d that it does not matter which attribute we choose when we prove the general thesis that “anything following directly from an attribute must be infinite.” This is because, he says, “the demonstration is universal.”⁴¹ That is, when used in the service of a universal demonstration, the choice of attribute is arbitrary because the thesis will hold for any attribute. The choice of attribute in the demonstration of parallelism is equally arbitrary, since the general thesis seems to follow from Spinoza’s conception of an idea as an entity that takes an object and not anything about the objects of ideas themselves.⁴² That is, it holds generally because of the nature of ideas, not because there are two or more attributes. Since parallelism, like the thesis in 1P21d, is a core thesis in his metaphysics, and one in

⁴¹ At 2P43s, he also notes that the demonstration of 1P20 is universal. The scholium to 2P46 claims that 2P45 is universal. Also see 4P4, 4P16 for further examples.

⁴² As the demonstration makes clear, the essential connection between knowledge of causes and effect establishes relations among ideas (namely of causes and effects) and the idea-object relation establishes the two parallel orders because every idea has an object (2A3) and since ideas of extended things cannot be conceived under the same attribute as their objects.

which the nature of the attributes plays a central role, it would be natural for Spinoza, following the geometrical method, to demonstrate that some core theses *would* hold for other attributes.⁴³ But again, a demonstration of this kind of geometrically general claim neither suffice to prove that there *are* other attributes nor to give us an idea of what “another attribute” could be. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that 2p7s can be given a reasonable, systematic reading that is friendly to the only-two attribute view.

Spinoza might have included this phrase for purely rhetorical reasons. Some of Spinoza’s readers might have had the view that God has attributes other than Thought and Extension. However, Spinoza has no use for “other attributes” in his system. So, Spinoza gains no advantage from trying to engage with those that believe in other attributes: an extended discussion of this issue would be an abstruse distraction.

4.2.2. 2P13d, Letters 64 and 66

1.1.1.3 Denying knowledge of “other attributes”

Melamed argues that 2P13d implies that Spinoza worried about the implications of other attributes on his account of the nature of the mind (2017, 5). Spinoza writes

Next, if the object of the Mind were something else also, in addition to the Body, then since (by IP36) nothing exists from which there does not follow some effect, there would necessarily (by P12) be an idea in our Mind of some effect of it. But (by A5) there is no idea of it. Therefore, the object of our Mind is the existing Body and nothing else, q.e.d.

⁴³ This should allay Melamed’s (forthcoming, 5) worry that Spinoza does not mention doubting the existence of other attributes after asserting 2P7. On the Human Perspective Interpretation, the “doubt” itself would be impossible and, in any case, rhetorically unwise.

Note that Spinoza does not say that the “something else” is a mode of another attribute, though his appeal to 2A5 suggests that he might be worrying about modes of attributes other than Thought and Extension. After all, 2A5 states that we are aware only of modes of Thought and Extension. The demonstration, then, appears to be ruling out the possibility that our minds could include ideas of modes of “other attributes.”

Melamed believes that this text subtly implies that Spinoza takes there to be “other attributes” to be concerned about. While that reading is compatible with the text, it is not necessitated by it. Here, Spinoza seems to be offering a corrective to those who believe that we *do* have ideas of modes of other attributes. His proof is supposed to establish that we do not. However, this does not entail that (1) there *are* modes of “other attributes” and (2) that we do not have ideas of “them.” Spinoza could be understood as arguing for the conditional claim that “if there are other attributes, we would not be aware of their modes.” This conditional claim can be true even if there are no other attributes or if the notion of “other attributes” is irredeemably confused.

These same considerations bear on Melamed’s appeal to Letters 64 and 66, where Melamed tells us that “Spinoza unmistakably asserts the existence of infinitely many attributes unknown to the human mind.” However, the main goal of these letters is to establish that we cannot know any other attributes than Thought and Extension. On Melamed’s reading, Spinoza’s mere discussion of his ignorance of “other attributes” somehow commits him to “their existence.” This reading is a stretch to say the least: one can coherently deny knowledge of something without asserting its existence, otherwise one could never be agnostic about the existence of anything!

1.1.1.4 “Other Minds” in Letter 66

To be fair, the apparent commitment to “other attributes” in Letter 66 does not come in just the form of Spinoza’s denial of knowledge. In response to Tschirnhaus’ persistent and confused line of questioning about “other attributes,” Spinoza writes the following.

[...]To reply to your Objection, I say that although each thing is expressed in infinite modes in 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 infinite minds, since each of the infinite ideas has no connection with any other, as I’ve explained in the Scholium to E II P7, and as is evident from I P10.

In isolation from its context, Spinoza’s suggestion that there are infinitely many minds corresponding to ideas of modes of infinitely many attributes in the infinite intellect, seems to commit him to there being attributes other than Thought and Extension. However, in context, this passage does not appear to be so damning to the Human Perspective Interpretation.

First, let’s retrace what led Spinoza to this statement about infinitely many minds. The quoted passage above is a response to the following question from Tschirnhaus in Letter 55: “[why] does the Mind perceive only the Modification expressed through Extension, i.e., the human Body, and no other expression through other attributes?” As Spinoza’s citation of 1P10 and 2P7s in his response suggests, Spinoza denies that the human mind can have ideas of “other attributes” because it cannot conceive attributes other than what the human mind involves: namely, Thought, the attribute of the mind itself, and Extension, the attribute of the body. Spinoza’s response is essentially the same—though significantly terser—as his response in Letter 64 to nearly the same question from Tschirnhaus in Letter 63. There,

Tschirnhaus asks why we cannot know more attributes than Thought and Extension and Spinoza responds in Letter 64 with a lengthy demonstration.

What is relevant about this exchange with Tschirnhaus is (1) Tschirnhaus' repeated claim that Spinoza is committed to there being more than two attributes on account of God's have infinite attributes and (2) Spinoza's lack of an admission that this is the correct understanding of the infinity of God's attributes. In fact, in Letter 64, Spinoza seems to correct Tschirnhaus' misunderstanding by writing the following:

We form the axiom of 1P10s from the idea we have of an absolutely infinite Being (as I indicated at the end of that Scholium) and not from the fact that there are, or could be, beings which have three, four, etc., attributes.

The "axiom" Spinoza refers to seems to be 1P9, which states that "The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it." Spinoza claims that this follows from the 1D6 definition of an absolutely infinite being, which as we've seen, is a being that lacks no attributes. However, Spinoza does not claim in the exchange with Tschirnhaus that "there are other attributes" that he cannot think.

Spinoza seems to correct Tschirnhaus' misunderstanding of 1P9 on which Tschirnhaus assumes a numerical interpretation of "infinite" and then concludes that there are more than two attributes. Nevertheless, as the subsequent letters show, Tschirnhaus never receives this correction. His remaining questions seem premised on the idea that there are more than two attributes.

Given that Tschirnhaus seems to repeatedly misunderstand Spinoza's position on the infinity of the attributes, as well as his position on our inability to conceive them through each other, it is no surprise that his responses to Tschirnhaus become terser, and given the

otherwise polite tenor of the exchange, perhaps more irritated. Spinoza finishes Letter 66 by saying “If you attend just a bit to these things, you’ll see that there is no remaining difficulty, etc.” And it appears that Spinoza ceases to want to correct Tschirnhaus on the point about the infinity of God’s attributes.

So, it appears that Spinoza’s brief response just ignores Tschirnhaus’ misunderstanding and gives Tschirnhaus an explanation that assumes that there are more than two attributes. On this speculative assumption, Spinoza explains, there are infinitely many minds corresponding to infinitely many attributes. Of course, Spinoza would argue, we cannot know if there are these other minds, but it would appear to be the case that there would be infinitely many of them since there “could be” other attributes (Ep 64, IV/278/20). Remember: Spinoza cannot say intelligibly say that “there are not” or “could not be” other attributes because he cannot think them. So, it appears that Spinoza’s speculations in Letter 66 do not provide definitive evidence in favor of the Objective Interpretation.

4.2.3. Letter 56 to Hugo Boxel

Another popular bit of text to cite in favor of the Objective Interpretation is in Letter 56.⁴⁴ Here, Spinoza responds to Boxel’s worry that Spinoza claims to have complete knowledge of God in virtue of knowing all of God’s attributes. In response, Spinoza says:

To your question as to whether I have as clear an idea of God as of a triangle, I reply in the affirmative. But if you ask me whether I have as clear a mental image of God as of a triangle, I reply in the negative. We cannot imagine God, but we can apprehend him by the intellect. Here it should also be observed that I do not claim to have complete knowledge of God, but I do understand some of his attributes

⁴⁴ See Curley (2016, 423 n.109), Melamed (forthcoming, 5-6), and Melamed (2017, 99)

(*attributa*)—not indeed all of them (*omnia*), or the greater part (*maximam partem*)—

and it is certain that my ignorance of very many attributes does not prevent me from

having knowledge of *some* of them. (emphasis added)

Spinoza clearly denies that he knows all, or even most of what the Latin refers to as God's "*attributa*." At first glance, the qualification that he fails to know the greater part (*maximam partem*) is highly suggestive of the Objective reading because it suggests (1) that Spinoza believes that there *are* many more attributes and (2) he fails to know the majority of them. Without the qualifications, in other words, the text would be consistent with the Human Perspective Interpretation because it would amount to a mere denial of knowledge of other attributes.⁴⁵

We should note something important about the Latin here. Spinoza wrote the original Letter 56 in Dutch, which was subsequently lost. What we have is in its place in the *Opera Posthuma* is a Latin version of unknown origin. If it is a translation, it is entirely possible that the translator chose the Latin *attributa* to translate the relevant Dutch, without regard for its technical usage. We are unaware whether the letter, for example used *eigenschappen*, which, in the *Short Treatise*, corresponds to the more technical notion of attribute of the *Ethics*, or a word like *eigenen*, which Spinoza uses to refer to non-attribute *propria* of God like immutability and omniscience.⁴⁶ Given the close usage of these terms in Dutch (and the fact to be discussed below that Boxel insists on a non-Spinozistic usage of "attribute") a mistake would have been natural. If that is the case, and *attributa* is an unfortunate

⁴⁵ *Pace* those who cite Letter 64 and the *Short Treatise*'s denials of knowledge as suggestive of a commitment to other attributes.

⁴⁶ Cf. (KV, I, ii., 29) and (KV, I, vii, 6)

translation of a more neutral term like *eigenen*, then this text would not present as strong of a case for the Objective Interpretation.

Second, it should be noted that Spinoza freely uses *eigenschappen* throughout the *Short Treatise* to describe features of God that are not “proper attributes” (*eigene eigenschappen*) (KV, I, ii, 28 I/27/15), like being a cause of all things (KV III), having providence (V), predestining all things (VI), and so on. The loose usage of the Dutch suggests that we cannot always count on Spinoza to have the official definition of “attribute” in mind when using *eigenschappen*, and so even the natural translation of that term to *attributa* in the Latin could be misleading.⁴⁷

On a more neutral translation, Spinoza is merely claiming that he fails to know most of God’s properties, or most of the things that are true of God. This thesis is uncontroversial as far as the dispute over attributes is concerned: it is impossible for any finite being to know *everything* that there is to know about God, or Nature, if “everything” includes all of God’s modes in addition to its attributes. One can know all of God’s attributes, or God’s essence, without knowing all of the true things that one could predicate of God, in other words.

This is suggested in Letter 54, when Spinoza denies that God has certain human “attributes”. He writes, “I too, not to confuse the divine nature with the human, ascribe to God no human attributes, such as will, intellect, attention, hearing, etc.” (IV/252/1-3). These could not be “attributes” in the 1D4 sense because humans are not substances and are not *essentially* willing, hearing, and so on things. Boxel clearly adopts this unofficial usage in Letter 55.

⁴⁷ Curley wisely reveals this fact in his translation by putting “attribute” in quotes to suggest a non-official usage.

Furthermore, what Spinoza says about triangles to clarify his position right after the selected text suggests that word translated as *attributa*, was actually intended to indicate a lack of knowledge about a great deal of the *propria* that apply to God. Spinoza writes that,

When I was studying Euclid's *Elements*, I understood early on that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and I clearly perceived this property (*proprietatem*) of a triangle, although I was ignorant of many others.

Here, the translator chooses to use *proprietas* in the context of talking about the triangle instead of *attributa*, which is telling. If Spinoza means to clarify that he's talking about God's *essence* when he denies the completeness of his knowledge, the use of this theorem would be highly misleading. After all, the theorem that the interior angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees is hardly a candidate for characterizing the *essence* of a triangle. In the relevant part of the *Elements*, which Spinoza refers to in the example, this theorem is a *proposition* (1P17) about a property of a triangle, as opposed to a definition, and it follows from several other facts about sides and angles. The triangle, however, is *defined* in terms of the number of sides (1D19, 1D20).⁴⁸

Spinoza also uses this very example in the *Short Treatise's* Second Dialogue (I/32/10-26). Here, Spinoza compares his idea of a triangle with the idea of "the extension of one of its angles." He then mentions that these two ideas can be used to prove that the sum of the degrees of the interior angles is 180 degrees. However, this demonstration does not change the essence of the idea of the triangle. He writes,

⁴⁸ Here I am modeling my citation of Euclid on Spinoza, substituting "parts" in Spinoza for "books" in Euclid.

You see now that although this new idea [the theorem] is united to the preceding one [the triangle], no change takes place on that account in the essence of the preceding one. On the contrary, it remains without the least change.

So, in a similar context (a discussion about God's attributes) in a different work, Spinoza clearly distinguishes the essence of a triangle from what the theorem states. Given that Spinoza uses an example to clarify the incompleteness of his knowledge of God in which an essence is clearly *not* under discussion, it would be strange for him to be illustrating his ignorance of a great deal of God's *proper* attributes.

It would also be natural for Spinoza to have what he considers *propria* of God in mind when discussing this matter with Boxel, since Boxel's discussion focuses on God's purported "superhuman attributes": Boxel (Ep 55) argues that if we do not think of the divine attributes as infinite versions of human attributes, like willing, thinking, sensing, etc., then he fails to understand what Spinoza means by "God." As was mentioned before, Spinoza believes that these *propria* or "extrinsic denominations" can be reduced to Thought and Extension or eliminated entirely. It is natural, however, to see why Spinoza would deny full knowledge of all of God's *propria*, because to have such knowledge would be to have knowledge of *every* property that necessarily, though non-essentially, characterizes God. And, like in the case of the triangle, it is not clear how this could be possible.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ In fact, in some cases, it's not clear that we can get a full grasp on some of the *propria* themselves. See the discussion of the inexplicability God's omnipresence in CM (I/254/28-35).

4.2.4. From the Short Treatise

1.1.1.5 Note 3

A brief selection from a note in the *Short Treatise* appears to provide the most compelling evidence for the Objective Interpretation (I, i, n.3).⁵⁰ Spinoza writes,

After the preceding reflections on Nature, we have not yet been able to find in it more than two attributes that belong to this all-perfect being. And these give us nothing by which we can satisfy ourselves that these would be the only ones of which this perfect being would consist. On the contrary, we find in ourselves something which openly indicates to us not only that there are more, but also that there are infinite perfect attributes which must pertain to this perfect being before it can be called perfect.

And where does this Idea of perfection come from? It cannot come from these two, for two gives only two, not infinitely many. From where, then? Certainly not from me, for then I would have had to be able to give what I did not have. From where else, then, than from the infinite attributes themselves, which tell us that they are, though they so far do not tell us what they are. For only of two do we know what they are.

What appears to be especially troubling for the Human Perspective Interpretation about this passage is that Spinoza explicitly endorses the *general* thought “that there are other attributes,” even if he does not assert existence of a particular “other attribute.”

Additionally, the *Short Treatise* contains several instances wherein Spinoza is clear that “infinite” means “unlimited” or “all” when he talks about the infinity of God’s attributes.

⁵⁰ Joachim (39, n.5) claims that the following passages from KV establish that there are other attributes “beyond any reasonable doubt.”

Often, “infinite” and “all” are simply juxtaposed, with the latter clarifying the former. And Spinoza refers to God, the infinite being, as *All* in several places.⁵¹ So, Spinoza does not take the mistaken step of concluding from God’s infinity alone that it must have more than two attributes. There must be some other grounds for which Spinoza makes this conclusion.

Most of the passage other than this last thought is not problematic for my interpretation. On that view, we cannot know what the other attributes are and we lack any definite demonstration that there are no more than the two of which we are aware. However, in this note in one of Spinoza’s earliest works (and it should be emphasized that this is the only place where Spinoza makes this kind of substantive claim), he goes on to say that “something” compels us to assent to the idea *that* there are more. This something is in some sense “external to us” because it is impossible for us to generate or, better, achieve ideas of other attributes from the ideas of the two we can conceive. Spinoza’s best explanation is that this “something” is God insofar as God has other attributes.

Supporting one’s interpretation by pointing to Spinoza’s marginalia should seem problematic enough in its own right, but we shouldn’t exclude it from consideration.⁵² The issue with this text is not that it appears in the notes to an early treatise, it’s that this text itself and others in the *Treatise* itself suggest that Spinoza’s views on the attributes actually changed, and to my mind, *clarified* in the period between the composition of it and the *Ethics*. There are several important differences between Spinoza’s thought in the two works

⁵¹ See Section 4.1.3

⁵² And this is to (I think generously) ignore the problems inherent in interpreting the *Treatise*. As Curley notes in his introduction, the *Treatise* is likely a copy of a copy of another manuscript, contains errors in copying, and has features suggesting that it still required serious revisions. It is also unclear for various reasons whether we can take the marginal notes as definitive of Spinoza’s final thoughts on the matters on which he was writing.

(and in this selection in particular) that should be highlighted to help us make sense of this passage. The question we should ask is whether it is more likely that there is an interpretation that can reconcile these differences in the two works, or whether we should agree that Spinoza's thought is slightly, if importantly, different, at least when it comes to the issue of the other attributes.

The most important difference is Spinoza's views on the distinction between the attributes in the *Short Treatise* versus the *Ethics*. In the *Ethics*, it is of course a hallmark thesis that Thought and Extension can in no way be conceived through one another (1P10s). However, as some have noticed in the secondary literature, the same does not seem to be true in the *Short Treatise*.⁵³ Several texts suggest that modes of the two known attributes have causal influence on one another. Here are some examples:

- (1) Spinoza writes that the attributes "act on one another" and the soul can cause changes "in the animal spirits." (KV, II, xix, 10-11, I/91/32-92/26; II, xx, 2, I/95/27-I/96/5)
- (2) In fact, the soul and body "exercise influences on one another" because they are "united" (II, xix, 9, I/91/30)
- (3) The soul "arises from the existence" of the body. (App. II, 12, I/120/1)
- (4) There is no proposition demonstrating a causal barrier in the First Appendix's propositions, even though attributes are asserted to be really distinct and thus to have no overlapping modes. These axioms (3 and 4) are not strong enough to rule out cross-attribute causation.⁵⁴

⁵³ Della Rocca (1996, 12), Melamed (2013, 167, n.32-5), Donagan (1980, 101), Garber (2014)

⁵⁴ *pace* Della Rocca (*ibid*, 175, n. 36).

It should be noted, however, that Spinoza does seem to be suspicious about some body-soul interactions (for example, he denies that motion can be caused by the mind (II, xix, 8)), but the relevant passages still suggest that the link between modes of different attributes is much tighter than the parallel causal chains of 2P7.

What this suggests about our main quote, then, is that in the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza may have the philosophical tools necessary for explaining this “something” that gives him the idea that other attributes exist. His language in the quote suggests causality: the idea “comes from” the other attributes in some way. (After all, even though Spinoza takes the causal exclusion to be weakened here, he still thinks that there is enough of exclusion prevent knowledge of these attributes.) Perhaps, if Spinoza allows cross-attribute causal influences in the *Short Treatise*, then he could have allowed other attributes to implant this idea in him.

The details of this implantation, of course, are obscure. And the general move of pointing out the permeability of the causal barrier in the *Short Treatise*, taken even by supporters of the Objective Interpretation, is arguably a bit too generous to Spinoza, because it assumes that Spinoza’s note espouses a thesis that can be made consistent with the rest of his commitments in the *Treatise*. It does however, provide an interpretative route that is friendly to the Human Perspective Interpretation because Spinoza’s tentative, marginal, admission of other attributes into his ontology here is based on a core philosophical doctrine that greatly changed by the time he composed the *Ethics*. In Spinoza’s most systematic and clearest presentation of his philosophy, he repudiated the thesis that is necessary for defending the Objective Interpretation.

There is another interpretative route we could take here. We can assume that Spinoza’s note here is an expression of what he would later consider (in the *Ethics*) as a

confused way of conceiving the attributes. Note that in the passage, Spinoza appears to be thinking of the attributes as falling into a countable class under the abstract concept of an “attribute”: he argues that the two attributes could not have produce this “something” “for two can only yield two.” That is, numerically speaking, one cannot arrive at the idea of *infinitely many* things of a class by finite reflection on some finite number of things in that class. The latter point is consistent with Spinoza’s thoughts about the infinite.

But what seems problematic about the passage is that it conceives of infinite things as *numbered*, and as Letter 12 and 1P15s reveal, thinking of the infinite in terms of number is bound to lead to confusion because it involves using an imaginative aid to conceive the infinite. In this case, (and arguably in the case of interpretations that understand Spinoza’s view to be that there are uncountably many attributes), the confusion is inevitable: representing the attributes as *two*, namely as *numbered*, is bound to give the appearance that there is a limitation on how many attributes there are. This is why God’s having two attributes seems to be in conflict with its perfection, as Spinoza says in the note. Since there are numbers conceived as greater than two, it is natural, if we use the imaginative device of number to represent the attributes, to think that there are more attributes than two, and indeed more attributes than any finite number. But, again, by the standard of the *Ethics*, these thoughts are hopelessly confused.

So, if we cannot give an interpretation of the note that is consistent with the rest of the *Short Treatise*, we can at least see (1) that it expresses a highly natural, albeit confused thought that (2) can be diagnosed, as it were, using the resources of Spinoza’s more polished work. No matter which route we take, it appears as though the ideas expressed in this

marginal note are inconsistent with Spinoza's thought in the *Ethics* and thus do not mandate the Objective Interpretation.

1.1.1.6 Second Appendix

The considerations raised in 4.3.4.1 bear on a second appearance of the "other attributes" in the Second Appendix of the *Short Treatise*. Spinoza writes,

Therefore, the essence of the soul consists only in the being of an Idea, or objective essence, in the thinking attribute, arising from the essence of an object which in fact exists in Nature. I say *of an object that really exists*, etc., without further particulars, in order to include here not only the modes of extension, but also the modes of all the infinite attributes, which have a soul just as much as those of extension do (I/119/6).

Here, we see a more explicit mention of modes of the other attributes. Melamed quotes this text and writes that it is an "elaborate discussion" of those modes (forthcoming, 6-7).

However, he neglects to include the context of this statement in the Appendix. Later, Spinoza goes on to say,

This is why we have used these words in the definition, that the soul is an Idea arising from an object which exists in Nature. And with this we consider that we have sufficiently explained what kind of thing the soul is in general, understanding by this expression not only the Ideas that arise from corporeal modes, but also those that arise from the existence of each mode of the remaining attributes

But since we do not have, of the remaining attributes, such a knowledge as we have of extension, let us see whether, having regard to the modes of extension, we can discover a more particular definition, which is more suited to express the essence of our soul. For this is our real intention (I/119/33).

As we see in 2P7, Spinoza aims to give a *general* definition of “soul” or “mind” on which something’s “soul” is just an idea that takes that thing as its object. My soul is the idea of my body, as Spinoza will assert at 2P13. However, Spinoza immediately denies that we have knowledge of the “remaining” attributes and then moves on to his “real intention” which is to discuss the ideas of extended things.

This is consonant with Spinoza’s vague “feeling” *that* there are “other attributes” mentioned in 4.3.4.1. As I argued there, Spinoza does not seem to have settled his views on the distinction between and causal isolation of the modes of different attributes. If he takes himself to have a notion that there are other attributes, it makes sense that he might produce this general definition and then ignore some of its consequences. However, as we see in texts like 1P10 and its scholium in the *Ethics*, Spinoza is very clear that we cannot conceive “other attributes” through Thought and Extension. So, any “feeling” that there are other attributes must be confused.

5. Conclusion

In 2.3, I argued that a God’s Perspective Interpretation would be mandated by Spinoza’s text if we had to answer “yes” to one of the following questions.

1. Does “intellect” in Spinoza’s definition of “attribute” refer only to the infinite intellect?
2. Does “intellect” in that definition refer only to the finite intellect?
3. Is the “perception” referred to in that definition inaccurate?
4. Does Spinoza’s text require the Numerosity Interpretation?
5. Does Spinoza’s text commit him to the existence of humanly uncognizable attributes?

Over the last three sections, I have argued that Spinoza's text does *not* mandate a yes to any of these questions. If I am right, then the Human Perspective Interpretation provides a plausible interpretation of Spinoza's text. We are not required to ascribe to Spinoza a commitment to attributes other than Thought and Extension or to a "real essence" which we subjectively perceive as Thought and Extension. Because Spinoza's text does not require a God's Perspective Interpretation, we are free to decide on which interpretation is correct on philosophical grounds: which interpretation provides the simplest, most coherent reconstruction of Spinoza's theory of the attributes? Because even supporters of God's Perspective Interpretations acknowledge deep inconsistencies in Spinoza on their readings, we have reason to consider alternative interpretations. I suggest we start anew with a human perspective on Spinoza's metaphysics.

CHAPTER 2: THE CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTION AMONG SUBSTANCE AND ITS ATTRIBUTES IN SPINOZA

1. Introduction

According to Spinoza, there is only *one* substance: God (1P14). In other words, God is the only being that does not depend on something else for its existence (1D3). Every other being (e.g., human minds and bodies) is just a *way* that God is, or a “mode” of God (1D5).

Spinoza defines “God” as a “substance consisting of infinite attributes” (1D6) and tells us that attributes are “what intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence” (1D4). The human intellect perceives God’s essence as constituted by *two* attributes: Thought and Extension. In other words, we conceive God as essentially a thinking and extended thing.⁵⁵

Because God is a substance, we do not conceive God through anything else (1D3). Our idea of God, in other words, does not involve an idea of some other being on which God depends. Similarly, Spinoza argues that God’s attributes must be conceived through themselves (1P10). One cannot conceive these “attributes” through one another: one cannot understand extended things as depending on or causing thinking things and vice versa.

⁵⁵ According to those with an “Objective Interpretation” of the attributes, God has *more* attributes than the two we perceive. I cast doubt on the textual warrant and coherency of this interpretation in Chapters 1 and 3. For the purposes of this chapter, all that matters is that God has more than one attribute, which no one will contest.

Spinoza claims that God's attributes, in other words, can be conceived to be "really distinct" (1P10). As such, Spinoza argues, the attributes of Thought and Extension and their respective modes, have "nothing in common" and "cannot be understood through one another" (1A5).

Nevertheless, Spinoza claims that the "really distinct" attributes are each expressions of "one and the same" substance, and that the modes of these attributes are "one and the same," yet comprehended under distinct attributes (2P7). In other words, the attributes of Thought and Extension are distinct "expressions" of, or ways of conceiving "one and the same" God and extended and thinking things are "one and the same," conceived in two different ways.

It is clear that these doctrines form the foundation of Spinoza's metaphysics of substance and attribute. However difficult these doctrines might be to understand in isolation, they appear to be outright inconsistent when considered in conjunction, at least if the popular Objective Interpretation is correct.

On the Objective Interpretation, the attributes what *God* conceives of God's own essence. Because God has perfect knowledge, according to Spinoza, it must be that God's essence "really" is divided into multiple attributes. As such, the distinction among attributes must correspond to "objective" distinctions *in* God of some kind. These "objective distinctions" introduce what I'll call the Identity and Simplicity Puzzles.

Spinoza seems to believe that all that exists is God and God's modes (1A1). Because attributes are clearly not modes, Spinoza seems to believe that a substance is *identical* to its attributes.⁵⁶ How can *one* God be identical to *two* "really distinct" attributes?

Finally, Spinoza argues that God is simple, or "undivided" (1P12-3). For Spinoza, God cannot be conceived as having "parts" (1P15, Ep 12). How can a *simple* substance be conceived to be "divided" into two "really distinct" attributes?

The key to solving these puzzles lies in Spinoza's claim that one God is conceived under multiple attributes. Spinoza claims that "...the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that" (2P7). In other words, the multiplicity of God's attributes seems to be explained by a multiplicity of ways that God is "comprehended" or ways that God "expresses" God's essence. How should we make sense of this claim?

I will argue in this chapter that Spinoza's elegant, simple solution to these puzzles involves the idea that a substance and its attributes are merely "conceptually distinct." Though we can *conceive* God as having "really distinct" attributes, this does not entail that the attributes *are* "really distinct" from one another or from God. In other words, the attributes are different ways of conceiving the same thing. Of course, there are multiple ways of understanding this last claim.

On what I'll call the Aspect Interpretation, the multiple "ways" of understanding God correspond to multiple objective "aspects" of God. While God has distinct aspects—

⁵⁶ Of course, this textual argument for the identity of substance and attribute is too quick. See 2.1 for a more rigorous textual case.

objective, intrinsic differences in God that we call “attributes”—these are aspects of one God.

The Aspect Interpretation of Spinoza can be understood as an extension of one interpretation of Descartes’ account of a “conceptual distinction.” On this interpretation of Descartes, God’s attributes are each aspects of a complex idea of God. When we understand God as omniscient, for example, we “selectively attend” to that attribute and “ignore,” for example, God’s omniscience. On this Interpretation, God is not strictly speaking identical with God’s attributes. I will argue that, whatever the merits of the Aspect Interpretation are for understanding Descartes, the Aspect Interpretation does not adequately explain Spinoza’s text.

Instead, I will adopt a highly plausible interpretation of Descartes’ notion which I will call the Cognitive Route Interpretation. On this interpretation, the attributes are strictly identical to God, but we use distinct names of the attributes to indicate the “cognitive routes” we follow to the idea of God. The distinction in the attributes is a distinction in our “ways” of conceiving God and not distinctions in God.

I will then extend the Cognitive Route Interpretation to Spinoza and defend it both as textually warranted and as providing an elegant solution to our three interpretative puzzles about Spinoza’s theory of God’s attributes. On this view, the “distinction” between the attributes Thought and Extension amounts to a distinction in the starting points on our routes to the idea of God. On the one hand, I can come to the idea of God by understanding God as the cause of extended things by making the idea of my body clear and distinct. On the other, I can come the idea of God by understanding God as the cause of thinking things by making the idea of my mind clear and distinct. But no matter which of these two “routes” I take, I

come to form the same idea of the same being, God. God is, in other words, “one and the same substance” conceived in two different ways.

2. Two Puzzles

The two puzzles for Spinoza’s theory of substance and attribute are introduced by what is referred to as the Objective Interpretation of Spinoza’s account of God’s attributes. Spinoza defines “attribute” as “what intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence” (1D4). On the Objective Interpretation, the “intellect” in this definition refers to God’s intellect: the attributes are what God conceives of God’s own essence. Our perceptions of God’s essence are adequate or “objective” because God perceives God’s essence in the same way.

According to Spinoza, God’s perception of God’s essence is of course true (2P32). Furthermore, God *must* conceive the attributes to be really distinct (1P33s2, 1P10).⁵⁷ If God is not mistaken, there must be some ground of God’s divided conception of God’s own essence.

This need to ground God’s divided conception leads immediately to the Puzzles, at least if we interpret Spinoza’s claims that substance and its attributes are identical and that substance is “simple” using unqualified notions of “identity” and “simplicity.” In Section 3, I will consider the Aspect Interpretation’s attempt to qualify these notions.

⁵⁷ At 1P10, Spinoza writes that we *can* conceive the attributes as really distinct, but since there is no potential intellect in God (1P33s2), God *must* understand them to be really distinct.

2.1. The Identity Puzzle

There is ample textual evidence that Spinoza took the attributes to be identical to substance. Despite their different definitions, the idea that “attribute” is interchangeable with the notion of “substance,” occurs repeatedly throughout Spinoza’s work. This interchange appears in the text in two forms. The first is when Spinoza describes the attributes as self-conceived, which is how he defines substance. The second is when Spinoza appears to interchange “substance” and “attribute” in proofs, definitions, and clarifications.

In 1P10, Spinoza demonstrates that attributes must be conceived through themselves. Here the proof relies solely on the definitions of “substance” and “attribute.” Spinoza argues that since the attributes are perceived to be the essence of substance—that which explains what substances *are* in a way that distinguishes them from all other beings—and substances are conceived through themselves, then attributes must be conceived through themselves. We can use this result in conjunction with other claims in the *Ethics* to conclude that substances are identical to attributes. At 1A2, Spinoza claims that everything is either conceived through itself or through something else. At 1P6c, Spinoza claims that only substances and their modes exist. Together with the definitions of substance and mode, these entail that substances are the only self-conceived things and that modes are conceived through those substances. 1P10 makes it clear that attributes are not modes, since they are conceived through themselves. Thus, substances are identical to their attributes.

This conclusion is stated more succinctly in a different context at 1P28d, wherein Spinoza writes that “For there is nothing except substance and its modes (by A1, D3, and D5) and modes (by P25C) are nothing but affections of God's attributes.” This claim is only coherent if substances are identical with their attributes.

At 1P29, Spinoza defines *Naturata naturans* as “what is in itself and is conceived through itself, *or* [*sive*] such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e. [...] God...” Here, Spinoza uses the Latin *sive* which he typically uses to indicate that he is clarifying what has just been said. This suggests that the attributes, “*i.e.* God,” are in themselves and conceived through themselves.

There are a number of texts where Spinoza uses the notions of “substance” and “attribute” interchangeably. In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza says explicitly that he uses the term “attribute” to describe what “others call [...] substances”, namely “a being existing through itself” (I, viii, 10). He also uses “substance” to clarify the term “attribute,” writing that “P3: Every attribute, *or* substance is by its nature infinite...” (IApp.)

The Ethics is replete with similar examples. At 1P4, Spinoza again clarifies that attributes and their substances are identical. He writes, “Therefore, there is nothing outside the intellect through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another except substances, *or what is the same* (by D4), *their attributes*, and their affections, q.e.d.”.⁵⁸ 1P19 and 1P20 suggest that the same proofs can be used to show that “God, *or* all of God’s attributes” are eternal and immutable. In each case, eternity and immutability are predicated of the attributes in virtue of the attributes constituting the essence of an eternal and immutable substance. And in 1P20, Spinoza argues that God’s existence is identical with his essence. Since God’s essence is perceived as God’s attributes (1D4), God must be perceived as identical with God’s attributes.

In the proof of 1P30, Spinoza subtly and without argument switches from a proof about substance to a proof about the attributes. He sets out to prove that the infinite intellect

⁵⁸ All cases of underlining are my emphasis.

comprehends only God's attributes and the modes of those attributes. His proof relies on the premise that nothing exists outside of *substance* (God) and its affections. However, he does not conclude that because the infinite intellect comprehends everything it must comprehend *substance* and its modes. Instead, he concludes that it must comprehend God's *attributes* and their modes. This would be a leap in logic if substances were somehow distinct from attributes.

All of this textual evidence suggests that Spinoza understood the attributes to be *identical* to substance. This might suggest the following unsound syllogism:

- 1) Thought = Attribute
 - 2) Extension = Attribute
 - 3) God = Attributes
 - 4) God = Thought
 - 5) God = Extension
- ∴ Thought = Extension

The conclusion of this syllogism seems to be false for Spinoza. Spinoza seems to suggest that the attributes are *not* conceived to be identical to one another. At 1P10s, Spinoza claims that we can conceive the attributes as “really distinct” and “in isolation” of one another. At 1P2, he claims that substance with different attributes have “nothing in common with one another.” These would be strange claims if the attributes were identical. So, how is it that distinct attributes can be identical with one and the same substance?

Spinoza's text gives us a hint of his solution to this puzzle. At 2P7s, Spinoza tells us that

Before we proceed further, we must recall here what we showed viz. that whatever can be perceived by an infinite intellect as constituting an essence of substance pertains to one substance only, and consequently that the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that.

So, a solution to the Identity Puzzle will lie in understanding Spinoza's claim that *one and the same* substance is "comprehended" or *conceived* under two *distinct* attributes.

2.2. The Simplicity Puzzle

Immediately after demonstrating that God exists (1P11), Spinoza demonstrates that attributes cannot "divide" substance (1P12) and that, in general, nothing can "divide" substance (1P13). 1P13 is clearly directed at the claim that a substance can be divided into "parts," i.e., modes, so it does not concern us here.

Though Spinoza warns us against concluding that distinct attributes divide substance into distinct substances at 1P10, 1P12 gives us an explicit demonstration justifying that warning. The demonstration starts with the assumption to be shown to be false: assume that a substance *is* divided by its distinct attributes. Spinoza notes that the products of that division will be either substances or non-substances (1A1). We have to remember that by this point of the *Ethics*, Spinoza has demonstrated that (1) substances are infinite, (2) substances are self-caused and cannot cause one another and that (3) substances can only be distinguished by their attributes (after all, the "attributes" are what the intellect conceives as the *essence* of substance). So, if we assume that the products of our division are substances, we must conclude that a single substance can be divided into, for example, two infinite, self-caused substances, each with its own attribute. And, because these substances are the result of

“dividing” a more complex substance, it must be that either (1) the more complex substance is the cause of the simpler substances or (2) vice versa. However, at 1P6, Spinoza demonstrates that distinct substances cannot be the cause of one another because they have nothing in common with one another. That is, if the simpler substances have different attributes, then they have nothing in common with one another and thus cannot enter into causal relationships with one another (1P3). This shows that our assumption, that a substance with many attributes can be “divided” is false.

If the products of our division are *not* substances—if the substance is ultimately composed of non-substances—then the substance would be produced by something else. However, Spinoza demonstrates at 1P7 that substances are the sole causes of themselves. It cannot be that a substance’s attributes divide it.

These demonstrations are ways of expressing Spinoza’s views on the indivisibility of substance into complex, argumentative form. Spinoza’s ideas on the indivisibility of substance are more clearly expressed in Letter 12. In Letter 12—and in a less clear way 1P15—Spinoza argues that the “infinite,” namely infinite substances, are properly understood as being free of limitation and division. Any perceived division in substance will be the result of confused imaginative thinking. So, thinking of substances as intrinsically “divided” into parts or more fundamental substances is necessarily confused. I will not rehearse the arguments for this conclusion here.

Nevertheless, as was mentioned in 2.1, we can conceive substance as constituted by “really distinct” attributes. Now, even if one disagrees that substance and attribute are identical *simpliciter*, as supporters of the Objective Interpretation (Section 2.3) must, it appears that real divisions among attributes appear to complexify substance *in some way or*

another. For example, a real distinction among attributes suggests that God's *essence* is complex, even if God is not. In any case, it is not immediately clear how an "undivided" substance can have a division between its attributes.

2.3. Motivating the Aspect Interpretation

It seems that the only path forward for the Objective Interpretation is to qualify the sense in which attributes and substance are *identical*, the sense in which it is the *same* substance under each attribute, and the sense in which substance is *simple*. In Section 3, I will examine how the Aspect Interpretation relaxes the notions of identity and simplicity. On the Aspect Interpretation, attributes are merely *aspects* of God. The notion of an "aspect" is notion custom-engineered to allow for the tightest ontological relationship between God and the attributes that is not just identity. On this view, this relationship is so close that it justifies Spinoza's sliding back and forth between the notions of God and God's attributes. It is "one and the same" God under the distinct attributes because those attributes are all aspects of the same thing. And because "aspects" are not *parts* of God, they do not "complexify" God except in a totally unqualified sense. I will argue that there is not sufficient textual evidence in support of the Aspect Interpretation and, in any case, these loose notions of identity and simplicity are too mysterious to ascribe to Spinoza.

The alternative interpretation I offer in Section 4 is not an Objective Interpretation. It is what I refer to elsewhere as the Human Perspective Interpretation. On this interpretation, the primary meaning of "attribute" is what *humans* perceive of God's essence.⁹⁹ Humans can

⁹⁹ On the Human Perspective Interpretation, the definition of attribute (1D4) should be read "An attribute is what intellect perceives of substance as constituting [that substance's] essence." This interpretation does not assume

conceive God as divided into attributes, but they can also understand an ability to draw this division in the intellect is product of their own initially confused thought about God and not the product of a division internal to God.⁶⁰ God is simple and identical to God's attributes *tout court*.

3. Spinoza on “real distinctions”

How can Spinoza solve the Identity and Simplicity Puzzles? His solution lies in the claim that the attributes “can be conceived to be really distinct” (1P10s). In this section, I will trace Spinoza's concept of “real distinction” to its origin in Descartes' theory of distinctions, especially as that theory is expressed in his *Principles of Philosophy*. I will argue that Spinoza and Descartes differ in what they take to be the metaphysical consequences of a conceived “real distinction” between two things. Descartes holds that clearly and distinctly conceived real distinctions “divide” substances, where Spinoza claims that clearly and distinctly conceived real distinctions do not “divide” substance. In other words, Spinoza takes the “real distinction” between attributes have the (lack of) metaphysical consequences of Descartes calls a “conceptual distinction.”

On the Aspect Interpretation, conceptual distinctions correspond to distinctions in different “aspects” of a substance. To clarify the Aspect Interpretation, I will briefly describe how Nolan uses it to make sense of Descartes notion of a conceptual distinction. After discussing Descartes, I will give an example of how one of Spinoza's interpreters seems to

that “intellect” is tacitly modified in some way. The attributes are in the finite human intellect *and* the infinite intellect, at least insofar as the former conceives the latter.

⁶⁰ That is not to say that the “attributes” are therefore *illusory*, as the now defunct Subjective Interpretation would require. Cf. Wolfson (v.1, 112-21, 142-57)

extend the Aspect Interpretation to Spinoza's theory of the attributes. I will then argue that the Aspect Interpretation is untenable in Spinoza.

3.1. Descartes on substance and attribute

3.1.1. Real, Conceptual, and Modal Distinctions in Descartes

In the *Principles of Philosophy*, the conception of a "conceptual distinction" is one part of Descartes' tripartite theory of distinctions. Each distinction is characterized by (1) how it is conceived and (2) what ontological distinction Descartes takes it to correspond to. I will characterize each distinction in terms of two things, A and B, that bear the relevant distinction to one another.

Descartes writes that A and B are *really distinct* just in case A and B "can be clearly and distinctly conceived apart from one another" (I, 60). According to Descartes, only substances are properly called "really distinct" because only substances can be conceived apart from one another. The famous example of a real distinction is the real distinction between mind and body. According to Descartes, a mind can be conceived as existing apart from its body and vice versa. Minds and bodies are therefore understood to be distinct substances.

A and B are *modally distinct* (I, 61) just in case either A is a mode of B or vice versa or A and B are modes of the same substance. Take the first case: A is a mode of substance B. We can recognize that A and B are modally distinct because we can clearly and distinctly perceive B apart from A but we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive A apart from B. Furthermore, if A and B are both modes of the same substance, then we can perceive them apart from each other but not apart from the substance that they modify. Descartes gives the example of the shape of an extended substance to illustrate a modal distinction: one can

conceive the extended substance without its particular shape, yet one cannot conceive of a particular shape except as a modification of an extended substance.

Finally, A and B are *conceptually distinct* (I, 62) just in case we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive A apart from B and vice versa.⁶¹ For Descartes, there is only a conceptual distinction between a substance and its attributes and between the attributes themselves. For example, Descartes claims that a substance and its duration (one of its attributes) are only conceptually distinct: if one conceives of a (finite) substance without duration, then one has to concede that that substance doesn't exist, so one cannot clearly and distinctly perceive a substance without duration. And, one cannot clearly and distinctly perceive duration except as it belongs to an enduring substance.

The interpretations of Descartes discussed here disagree about the ontological consequences of conceptual distinctions. Do conceptual distinctions correspond to distinct “aspects” of a substance, or do they not make any ontological distinction at all?

3.1.2. These Distinctions in Spinoza

Spinoza clearly had these distinctions in mind when constructing his philosophy.

The notion of a conceptual distinction appears in various places in Spinoza's work. In the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza claims that “[A substance] must, therefore, be explained by some attribute, from which, nevertheless, it is distinguished only by a distinction of reason

⁶¹ As Nolan (135) notes, Descartes says only that

[a conceptual] distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it the attribute in question, or, alternatively, by our inability to perceive clearly the idea of one of the two attributes if we separate it from the other (PP 62).

He does not explicitly say the converse. Nolan argues that PP 55 implies the converse.

It should be noted that “conceptual distinction” is often translated as “rational distinction.”

[ratione distinguatur].” (*CM* 1, III) In that work, he also warns the reader against confusing conceptual and modal distinctions as (he claims) Descartes does (*CM* I, VI). Furthermore, he claims that the attributes are distinct only by reason and that this follows from the fact that God is a simple being (*CM* I, V)) In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza tells us that truth and falsity are “distinct only by reason and not really” and goes on to say that a distinction of reason does not match a distinction in the thing conceived (II, XV). In the *Ethics* at 4P8, Spinoza argues that the idea of an affect is only “conceptually [*conceptu*] distinct” as opposed to really distinct from its object. Importantly, 4P8’s demonstration cites 2P21 which in turn cites 2P7, Spinoza’s argument for the identity of substance conceived under the distinct attributes. This suggests that substance and attribute are conceptually distinct in Spinoza, as they are in Descartes.

The notion of a modal distinction is implicit in Spinoza’s definition of mode at 1D5, where he claims that modes are “conceived through” their substances. At 1P15s[V], Spinoza argues that “parts” of extended substance are distinguished only modally as opposed to really. That is, the parts of extended substance are not themselves substances, but are merely “affections” of extended substance. In *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza explicitly cites and appears to endorse Descartes’ definition of a mode in the *Principles* (*CM* 1, I).⁶²

3.1.3. Spinoza’s Departure from Descartes

Though Spinoza clearly borrows Descartes theory of distinctions, he appears to depart from Descartes on a few key points.

⁶² He writes, “it is easy to see that being should be divided into being which exists necessarily by its own nature, or whose essence involves existence, and being whose essence involves only possible existence. This last is divided into Substance and Mode, whose definitions are given in the *Principles of Philosophy* I, 51, 52, and 56. So it is not necessary to repeat them here.” Insofar as the *CM* represents Spinoza’s own views, this appeal to Descartes’ definition reads like an adoption or endorsement of the Cartesian definition of “mode.”

First, Spinoza believes that *attributes* can be clearly and distinctly *conceived* to be really distinct from one another, even if he denies that they *are* really distinct (1P10s) and denies that substances can (1P14). Descartes holds that distinct *substances* are clearly and distinctly conceived to be really distinct and that attributes of distinct substances are clearly and distinctly conceived to be really distinct.⁶³

Second, Spinoza denies that clearly and distinctly conceiving two things as really distinct entails that they are really distinct substances, as he warns us in 1P10s.

Finally, as we will see in Section 3.2 and 4.2, Descartes does not think that really distinct things can be conceived “in isolation” of one another. To form clear and distinct idea of A, one must *exclude* it from a clear and distinct idea of B. Spinoza does not claim that conceiving A requires one to exclude B. He says that the attributes can be conceived “in isolation” of one another (1P10s).

The following table compares Spinoza and Descartes on the nature of the distinctions.

⁶³ The fact that attributes of distinct substances are conceived to be really distinct is implied by Descartes’ claim (PP 62) that a substance cannot be clearly and distinctly perceived apart from its attributes.

Descartes	How Conceived	What Conceived	Ontological Implications
Real Distinction	A conceived while excluding B and vice versa	A and B are substances or attributes of distinct substances	A and B are distinct substances or attributes of distinct substances
Conceptual Distinction	A not conceivable apart from B and vice versa	A is an attribute of substance B or vice versa or A and B are both attributes of the same substance	?
Spinoza	How Conceived	What Conceived	Ontological Implications
Real Distinction	A conceivable in isolation of B and vice versa	A and B are both attributes of the same substance	?
Conceptual Distinction	A not conceivable apart from B and vice versa	A is an attribute of substance B or vice versa	?

Table 3: Distinctions in Descartes and Spinoza

The key interpretative questions, then, are: what are the ontological implications for conceiving (1) conceptual distinctions in Descartes and (2) conceiving real and conceptual distinctions in Spinoza? We will now consider the answer given to these questions by the Aspect Interpretation.

3.2. The Aspect Interpretation in Descartes

The Aspect Interpretation is developed by Nolan in his “Reductionism and Nominalism in Descartes’s Theory of Attributes.” Nolan’s integrates Descartes’ theory of distinctions with Descartes’ theory of the mental operations that correspond to those distinctions. Nolan argues that we can characterize Descartes’ distinctions in terms two

kinds of “mental operations”: “abstraction” and “exclusion” (133-5). For ease of exposition, assume that these operations are performed clearly and distinctly.

Imagine conceiving of some complex idea, say of a complex substance. When forming an idea from some richer idea via *abstraction*, I selectively attend to some “aspect” of a complex idea, while “turning [my] thought away” from other aspects of that idea. Nolan cites the example of abstracting the shape of an extended substance from the substance itself. The abstraction here consists in mentally “focusing” on the shape and ignoring the substantiality or extendedness of that substance. That is not to say that we imagine some other representation of the shape, say in lines of chalk written on a blackboard. Instead, we attend to the shape as it is present in its substance while ignoring other features of that substance.

In contrast to abstraction, *exclusion* doesn’t involve mere selective attention. When I exclude one idea from another, I attend to one while “denying” the other. The most notable kind of exclusion, for Descartes, is my ability to exclude my idea of my mind (a thinking substance) from my idea of my body (an extended substance): I can conceive of my mind while denying the existence of my body and vice versa. Nolan notes whenever I can exclude, I can also abstract, but not vice versa since exclusion is a more “extreme” mental operation. Descartes claims that we cannot conceive of the attributes in isolation of one another because, in order to conceive one, we must “deny” the other.

According to Nolan, Descartes took these different mental operations to have different ontological implications. For Descartes, abstraction carries no ontological weight: the fact that I can selectively attend to A while ignoring B does not entail that there is a robust metaphysical distinction between A and B outside of my intellect. However, my

ability to exclude A from B suggests that there is an ontological separation between A and B themselves.

The reason that exclusion reveals metaphysical distinctions and abstraction fails to do so has to do with the connection Descartes draws between our clear and distinct perceptions and metaphysical reality. Descartes adopts what is commonly known as the Truth Rule: if I clearly and distinctly perceive something, then it must be true. Descartes arrives at the Truth Rule by reflecting on God's goodness: he argues in the Fourth Meditation, for example, that my clear and distinct perceptions cannot be in error because otherwise God would be a deceiver. That is, God would have introduced a gap between my conception of the reality when I'm at my epistemic best and reality in itself. Because God is not a deceiver, it must be that things really are the way I conceive them to be, at least insofar as I am clear and distinct. For this reason, if I clearly and distinctly *exclude* A from B, then there must be some kind of distinction between A and B that warrants this exclusion. The same is not true of abstraction: even when I am clear and distinct, I cannot fully separate A and B when I abstract A from B or vice versa. "Focusing on" A in B is not the same as actively denying B.

According to Nolan, modal, conceptual, and real distinctions can be characterized in terms of the presence and mutuality of exclusion. If A and B are mutually excludable, then A and B are really distinct substances. In other words, if I can conceive of A while excluding B and vice versa, then A and B are really distinct. If A and B are non-mutually excludable, then A and B are modally distinct. In other words, if A is excludable from B but not B from A or vice versa, then A and B are only modally distinct. If A and B are not excludable at all, that is, are mutually inclusive, then A and B are only conceptually distinct. In other words, we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive A if we exclude B and vice versa.

For example, because I can exclude the idea of my mind from my body and vice versa, then my mind and body must be distinct substances. Because I can form an idea of my body while excluding its particular shape, but I cannot form an idea of my body's particular shape while excluding the idea of my body, my body's shape is a mode of my body. And because I can neither conceive of a substance while excluding its duration, nor conceive of a substance's duration while excluding the substance itself, a substance and its duration are only conceptually distinct. At best, I can *abstract* a substance's duration from my idea of that substance.

According to Nolan, abstraction consists in *selectively attending* to simple(r) aspects of a complex idea (136). We can illustrate the model with the example of a clear and distinct idea of a particular triangle. The triangle has a number of distinct, highly general, intrinsic features, which Nolan refers to as "aspects": a triangle has shape, duration, etc. According to Nolan, my idea of a triangle itself has various aspects corresponding to the various aspects of the triangle. When I abstract something from my idea of the triangle, I focus my attention on one of the various aspects of my idea: for example, I could form a (simpler) idea of the shape of the triangle while giving less attention its duration; I could focus on the size of the triangle while ignoring the particular triangle itself. That is not to say that I *deny* that the triangle has duration when I think of its shape or that I *exclude* its shape from its other attributes. I merely exert a kind of mental focus on each aspect.

Nolan's model can be extended to my idea of God, since God is a substance. For Nolan, my idea of God is multifaceted: I conceive God, for example, as omnipresent, omniscient, immutable, and existing (PP I, 22). I form an idea of one of these attributes by selectively attending to one aspect of my multifaceted idea of God. For example, I form an

idea of God's immutability by selectively attending to that aspect of God and ignoring other aspects such as his existence, omnipotence, and so on. Because I am merely abstracting these attributes from God, I am not recognizing a real distinction between God and its attributes. The same is true of the attributes themselves: on Nolan's reading, Descartes also believes that because we cannot exclude God's attributes from one another in thought, then those attributes must not be robustly distinct from one another outside of our thought.

Nolan is not clear whether Descartes took the distinctions among aspects to be "objective" in the sense of corresponding to distinctions in God. There is considerable pressure for Nolan's Descartes to take even conceptual distinctions to have some kind of ontological import, given that they can be clearly and distinctly perceived and thus must be "true" in some sense. If Nolan is forced to "ontologize" his aspects of God, his interpretation is not an example of what Nelson calls an Identity Interpretation (198). That is, if the idea of God has distinguishable aspects and that idea is "true," it would seem to be the case that Nolan is committed to the distinguishable aspects of the idea of God to correspond to distinct aspects of God. If this is the case, then Nolan cannot hold that God's attributes are strictly speaking *identical* to God. Furthermore, he cannot say that God is strictly speaking *simple* either because God has multiple intrinsic aspects. If his interpretation is coherent, he must qualify the notions of identity and simplicity.⁶⁴

It is clear, however, that an Aspect Interpretation of *Spinoza's* theory of the attributes would require the distinctions between "aspects" to have ontological import, at least if the Objective Interpretation is correct. On the Objective Interpretation, God's "aspects" cannot

⁶⁴ It should be noted again that Nolan does not make these claims. He seems to believe that the idea of God can be true and aspectual rich while being an idea of a simple substance (137-8). It is hard to see how this is possible.

reside wholly in the human intellect. As we will see, this “objective” Aspect Interpretation appears to reintroduce our puzzles for Spinoza.

3.3. The Aspect Interpretation in Spinoza

In *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*, Yitzhak Melamed offers an interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of the attributes that has strong affinities with Nolan’s Aspect Interpretation of Descartes. I should note at the start that Melamed himself does not explicitly endorse or reject Nolan’s characterization of Descartes, nor does he characterize Spinoza’s views in terms of mental operations. (He cannot because Melamed takes the distinctions to be drawn in God’s intellect.) Nevertheless, Melamed’s appeal to “aspects” has similar motivations and similar consequences and, as we will see, the differences between the two views are irrelevant.

On Melamed’s view, God’s attributes are just the infinitely many “aspects” under which God conceives itself. This aspectual reading is extended to modes: Melamed draws a distinction between “modes of God” and “modes of attributes.” Like God, the modes of God have infinitely many aspects, each corresponding to a particular attribute. A mode of an attribute—for example a mode of Extension—is an aspect of a corresponding mode of God, conceived under a particular attribute, for example, Extension. Each idea in the infinite intellect—itself a mode of Thought—has infinitely many aspects corresponding to the infinitely many aspects of God its modes. The *idea* of God, then, has a rich internal, aspectual structure mirroring God’s own rich, internal, aspectual structure.

Melamed’s notion of an “aspect” shares the following features with Nolan’s. First, it is not reducible to the notion of a “part,” nor is it identical to the notion of a “mode” (84). Second, a substance’s having distinct aspects does not suffice to divide that substance into

distinct substances. Melamed argues that Spinoza's claim that thinking and extended substance are identical just amounts to the claim that "thinking" and "being extended" are two aspects of the same substance.

Melamed does not appeal to selective attention or other "mental operations" in his discussion of God's conception of the attributes because Spinoza's God does not engage in such operations. On Melamed's interpretation, the "conceptual distinctions" in God's intellect among the different attributes amount to distinctions among aspects of ideas which in turn correspond to distinctions among aspects of God.

Unless Melamed's interpretation succumbs immediately to the Identity and Simplicity Puzzles, he must adopt qualified notions of identity and simplicity. After all, the distinct aspects of God are ontologically distinct even if they are not distinct substances. So, Melamed cannot say that God's attributes are identical. On this interpretation, to say that substance is "identical to its attributes" is to say that ontologically distinct "aspects" of that substance belong to the same substance.⁶⁵ Melamed cannot say that substance is identical to any particular attribute.

⁶⁵ Melamed is unclear on this point, especially given his repeated claim that God "has" the attributes, suggesting that the attributes are somehow distinct from God, at least collectively. Melamed hints that God is identical to the collection of attributes (83) in his discussion of "modes of God," where he tells us that God is the substance under all attributes, but it seems to me that his interpretation requires it. Otherwise, Melamed will have to commit himself to an independent notion of "substance" such that the collection of attributes is distinct from substance. His criticisms of Bennett (82-3) suggest that this latter option is not his view. In (2017, 101-3), Melamed claims that substance and attribute are only "rationally distinct" (or what I call "conceptually" distinct). However, (unlike me) Melamed takes "rational distinctions" to correspond to distinctions outside of the intellect.

Furthermore, Melamed can say only that God is simple in the sense of not having “parts” or not being composed of other substances. But, because the aspects of God are distinct in an unqualified sense, he cannot say that God is simple *simpliciter*.⁶⁶

3.4. Objections to the Aspect Interpretation in Spinoza

Whether or not the Aspect Interpretation is the best interpretation of Descartes, it does not make the best sense of Spinoza’s text. First, it’s far from obvious that Melamed’s notion of an “aspect” is present in Spinoza’s text. Second, it’s not obvious that the notion of an aspect is compatible with Spinoza’s apparently strict notions of identity and simplicity.

The main worry for Melamed’s interpretation is that the notion of an “aspect” is *ad hoc* interpretative invention rather than a notion adopted by Spinoza himself. According to Melamed, the notion of an “aspect” is at play through Spinoza’s metaphysics and provides him solutions to the various philosophical puzzles that have been ascribed to his theory of the attributes. However, Spinoza himself never characterizes his views in terms of “aspects” or “facets.” Given that the notion of an “aspect” is not reducible to other notions like “mode” or “part”, one would have expected Spinoza to have defined it in Part I of the *Ethics*.

The closest notion to that of an “aspect” is Spinoza’s notion of a “species,” in the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis*. (The only other usage is the one opposed to genus, which is clearly not at play here). Throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza discusses the intellect’s ability to consider things “under the aspect [*specie*] of eternity,” that is, to consider them without consideration of their status as durational, or temporal, things (e.g., 5P22, Part V, *passim*). It

⁶⁶ See Melamed’s discussion (2017, 101-3) of objective grounding of rational distinctions.

reasonable to give a Nolan-style gloss on this notion: when reason considers the body, for example, it ignores or abstracts away from those aspects of the body that are durational.⁶⁷

However, Spinoza does not suggest anywhere in these texts that “eternity” is “objective” in the sense it is intrinsic to God: Spinoza always couples this notion of “species” with the conception of the human mind.⁶⁸ In this sense, considering things under an aspect is essentially a “subjective” matter. Second, Spinoza is clear in the *Short Treatise* that eternity is not properly understood as an *attribute* of God, but is rather an “extrinsic denomination,” along with a variety of other putative “attributes” of God like immutability assigned by Spinoza’s contemporaries and predecessors (1, I, 29). As Nolan argues, the phrase “extrinsic denomination” appears to be borrowed from Suarez, who argues that distinctions of reason “consist[] solely in a certain [extrinsic] denomination [*denominacione*] issuing from concepts of the mind” and not in distinctions in the objects that those concepts apply to. This suggests that Spinoza actually thinks of conceptual distinctions in a similar way to Suarez, at least on Nolan’s reading of Suarez (Nolan 137). For that reason, it appears that Spinoza cannot have thought that attributes were merely aspects under which we consider a substance or its modes, much less “objective” aspects.

Of course, Melamed would readily admit that there is not much in the way of direct textual evidence here. The notion of an “aspect” is intended to be a useful interpretative posit which plays a central, albeit tacit role in Spinoza’s explication of his various complicated

⁶⁷ This is consonant with what Spinoza says about conceiving things *sub specie aeternitatis* in the TIE (108, II/39/16-20)

⁶⁸ One might argue that 1D6 is an exception since it claims that God’s essence is eternal. However, this is consistent with the identity of God’s essence with the attributes. Since the attributes are, on this interpretation, dependent on the human subject’s perception of God, their being conceived as eternal is also dependent on that perception. At best, 1D6 is equivocal between an intrinsic and extrinsic reading.

doctrines and one that helps Spinoza avoid numerous objections. The problem is that these objections are the result of Melamed's Objective Interpretation of the attributes.

Melamed takes it as a starting point of interpretation that Spinoza committed to the existence of more than two attributes. As Melamed makes clear in Chapters 5 and 6 of *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, the primary defense he offers of his Aspect Interpretation is that helps obviate the classic objection that Spinoza's parallelism is inconsistent with his commitment to the existence of modes other than Thought and Extension. The remainder of his defense consists in showing how central texts can be given an aspectual reading. As far as I can tell, Melamed never argues that Spinoza's text *mandates* the aspectual reading on its own terms. At best, Melamed can be construed as arguing that the Aspect Interpretation is the best *Objective* Interpretation and not the best Interpretation *tout court*. I have argued elsewhere that we have good reason to believe that Spinoza was *not* committed to these "other attributes," so we have reason to suspect that the Objective Interpretation is required by Spinoza's text in the first place.

The Aspect Interpretation's reliance on "loose" notions of identity and simplicity also seem to be in conflict with Spinoza's text. As was noted in Section 2, Spinoza appears to use the notions of "substance" and "attribute" interchangeably in definitions, propositions, and demonstrations. This interchangeability is hard to square with a "loose" conception of identity: if there is any kind of conceptual difference between an "attribute" and a "substance," then Spinoza's free exchange of these terms would appear to be unwarranted and, in some cases, problematic.

Furthermore, Spinoza's commitment to the indivisibility of substance in, e.g., Letter 12, is an unnatural fit for the "loose" conception of simplicity that the Aspect Interpretation

must employ. In Letter 12 and 1P15, for example, Spinoza illustrates the indivisibility of substance in the context of its being extended and lacking parts. However, his arguments against using the imaginative constructs of Number and Quantity apply more generally to *any* attempt to divide substance into classes of things. “Aspects,” as far as I can tell (given the opacity of the notion) divide substance in this way: “aspect” seems to refer to a class of discrete things that constitute substance.

These objections cast enough doubt on the viability of the Aspect Interpretation that I am willing to set it aside and consider an alternative. On the Cognitive Route Interpretation, I will now explicate, both Descartes and Spinoza hold that if A and B are conceptually distinct, then $A = B$ without qualification. Unlike the Aspect Interpretation, the Cognitive Route Interpretation is an Identity Interpretation. On this view, conceptual distinctions are not mirrored in or among substances *in any sense*.

4. A New Approach: Cognitive Routing

4.1. Cognitive Routing in Descartes

Nelson defends the Cognitive Route Interpretation of Descartes’s theory of distinctions in his “Conceptual Distinctions and the Concept of Substance in Descartes.” The key insight of this interpretation is the rejection of the idea that attributes are or correspond to *intrinsic* features of substance and our idea of it. Instead, Nelson takes the distinction between “substance” and each of the attributes to indicate something *extrinsic* to God and to be merely *nominal*. That is, “substance” or “God” and, for example, “omniscience” can be used to refer to a single, intrinsically simple idea of an intrinsically simple substance. The differences in the names of

the idea are used to indicate the different ways that the idea of God can be generated in the finite intellect.

At the center of Nelson's interpretation is the notion of a *cognitive route*. Consider one of the attributes that Descartes takes to belong to God: omniscience. Descartes takes himself to establish that there must be a being with each of these attributes by reflection on his own limitations. For example, imagine that a Cartesian meditator starts on a "route" to the idea of an omniscient being by first reflecting on a confused idea of her own knowledge. The meditator can come to realize that her knowledge is limited in various ways: she is subject to illusion and ignorance, for example. The meditator might come to realize that her knowledge can increase and furthermore that it can *indefinitely increase* because there is a potential infinity of things to know about the world around her. As the meditator clarifies and makes the idea of knowledge more distinct, she realizes this process of increasing knowledge is interminable and doomed to confusion. However, as she makes her idea of her knowledge more clear and distinct, she will come to realize that her limited knowledge is actually a limitation of a more perfect form of knowledge, a knowledge not of the infinitely complex world of finite minds and bodies, but of eternal truths that apply to that complex world. As she makes this further idea clear and distinct, the meditator can come to realize that there could be an *infinite* form of knowledge, that is, one not limited in any way. Of course, the meditator realizes that the infinite form of knowledge is only potential in her and will never be actual. Further, she may realize that perfect knowledge cannot be *merely* potential on pain of being imperfect. This leads the meditator to form the idea of actual, infinite knowledge. Since this knowledge is actual, it must belong to an actual perfect being, namely God.

Finally, the meditator has reached the idea of God. This “route” to the idea of God began with a confused idea of knowledge and ended with the idea of God.

Of course, the meditator was able to reach the idea of God via the process of clarification and distinction because, according to Descartes on this interpretation, the idea of God is attainable by the clarification and distinction of any given idea because the idea of God is present in any given idea as its ultimate cause.

On the Cognitive Route Interpretation, the terminal idea—the idea of God—of this route does not retain the intrinsic character of each step along the route. The terminus of this route is not God-qua-omniscient or Omniscience, in other words. It is the idea of *God*, an infinite substance. Furthermore, the idea of God, on this interpretation, is a simple idea. One cannot make the idea of God more clear and distinct by understanding God as dependent on some other being: God is, after all, a self-caused, necessarily existing substance.

Because this idea can be reached by making any given idea clear and distinct, there are many routes to the idea of God. However, if we were to follow a route starting with a different confused idea—of our own power, for example—and then end with the idea of God, we would have arrived at intrinsically the same idea. Of course, the ideas of God at the termini of these routes are modally distinct because we follow them at different times. However, these terminal ideas of God have no *intrinsic* differences with one another.

On this view, the distinct “content” of the ideas of omniscience, omnipresence, and so on is reduced to extrinsic facts about the distinct origins of the same idea of God. That is, the fact that the idea at the terminus of a cognitive route is an idea of “omnipresence” and not “omniscience” is explained in terms of its causal history in the subject: the distinct occurrences of the idea at the end of these termini are identical, even though they are reached

by distinct psychological processes. And, the distinction among these processes is accounted for in terms of the ideas that one starts with when they embark on the process of forming the idea of God as well as the ideas along the way.

Nelson argues that we use different terms for different attributes to refer to the idea of God because it is useful to mark a distinction in language between the various cognitive routes, especially if one's goal is to guide others to clear and distinct perceptions. For this reason, Nelson argues that while we can choose to use the distinct words, for example, "omniscience," "omnipresence," or just "God" to refer to the idea of God, the differences here do not mark distinctions in God or in the idea of God. To be clear, the names for different attributes—at least if they are used well—are not properly used to refer to the cognitive routes *themselves*, since those involve confusion. They are reserved solely for the clear and distinct perception at the end of each route.

Because the terminal ideas of these routes are all occurrences of an identical idea in the strict sense of "identical," there's no search for corresponding features of God match the intrinsic difference in the ideas themselves. That is, there is no need to posit two "aspects" of God that ground the difference between the omniscience perception and the omnipotence perception. On this reading, to say that A and B are conceptually distinct is to say that the cognitive route to A starts from a different idea than the cognitive route B, but A and B are distinct occurrences of the same idea.

On this interpretation, "substance" and its "attributes" are said to be identical because the "substance"/"attribute" distinction is merely *nominal*. Each word for substance and each attribute refers to the same idea, at least for those who have reached a clear and distinct

perception of God at the end of each route. This “identity” is not qualified in any sense: there is nothing in God or the idea of God corresponding to a distinction among attributes.

Furthermore, on this interpretation, we can say that God is simple in an unqualified sense because any of the cognitive routes we follow to God end with God. After all, for Descartes, God is not conceived through anything else and the idea of God is a simple idea. We cannot therefore analyze God into more basic “parts” or as constituted by other substances.

We can get a better understanding of “real distinction” on this account as well. A and B are really distinct just in case their ideas are distinct termini of distinct cognitive routes. For example, I might reach an idea of my mind (a substance for Descartes) by reflecting on the origin of my thoughts or reach an idea of my body (also a substance) by reflecting on the origin of the parts of my body. In these cases, the termini of these routes are different: my idea of my body is distinct from my idea of my mind because those ideas are *intrinsically* modally distinct in addition to being extrinsically modally distinct because I arrive at them at distinct times.

Though I cannot defend this claim in detail here, the Cognitive Route Interpretation seems to me to be the most plausible explanation of Descartes’ notion of a conceptual distinction. More importantly, however, it seems to be the best interpretation of Spinoza.

4.2. Cognitive Routing in Spinoza

On the Cognitive Route Interpretation in Spinoza, a substance is identical to its distinct attributes. The names “Thought” and “Extension” indicate that the idea of God can be arrived at by making the ideas of our thoughts and body clear and distinct, respectively. For example, if I begin with confused knowledge of my own body and then arrive at the idea of God from

that starting point, I might say that “God is a thinking thing” or that “Thought is an attribute of God.” Of course, we can arrive at the same idea of God whether we start with an idea of a thinking or extended thing. So, if I reflect on the causes of my body and eventually arrive at the idea of God, I will say that God “has the attribute of Extension.” In either case, however, the distinction between God and God’s attributes is merely nominal, at least for those who have formed a clear and distinct idea of God from the two starting points available to us.

Of course, Spinoza differs from Descartes in that Spinoza thinks that all cognitive routes that lead to a maximally clear and distinct idea lead to the idea of God. This is how the Cognitive Route Interpretation suggests we understand Spinoza’s claim that the attributes do not “divide substance” into distinct substances. Descartes, by contrast, would hold that the Thought- and Extension-routes lead to intrinsically distinct ideas of distinct substances like my mind or body.

1P10s might seem to present a challenge to the Cognitive Route Interpretation. At 1P10s, Spinoza claims that attributes “can be conceived to be really distinct.” On the interpretation of “real distinction” I’ve been defending, doesn’t this suggest that the idea of Thought is intrinsically different than the idea of Extension? Otherwise, in what sense could the attributes be conceived to be really distinct?

This challenge can be met if we look closely at Spinoza’s gloss of what it means to conceive the attributes as “really distinct.” He writes,

From these propositions it is evident that although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still cannot infer from that that they constitute two beings...

This clarification indicates another contrast between Descartes and Spinoza. Recall that, according to Descartes, conceiving A and B to be really distinct means “excluding” A from B and vice versa. This suggests that to fully understand, for example, Thought, one would have to exclude it from Extension. On the Cognitive Route Interpretation, this means that one would have to contrast one’s ideas of the termini of routes to clearly and distinctly perceive them as distinct.

At 1P10s, Spinoza takes his claim that the attributes can be conceived to be “really distinct” to mean they can be conceived “in isolation” of one another. This is strictly a weaker claim because it does not require one to contrast the terminal ideas of distinct cognitive routes. It is inevitable that Spinoza makes this weaker claim because he cannot believe that the terminus of any given cognitive route will be distinct: all routes end with God if they end with a clear and distinct perception at all.

Spinoza’s claim that the attributes can be conceived in isolation of one another seems to be required by his claim that Thought and Extension (and their modes) have “nothing in common” with one another and thus cannot be conceived through one another. In other words, Spinoza does not believe that cognitive routes with distinct starting points (that is, one starting with an idea of my body and the other with an idea of my mind) “cross” at any point. After all, minds and bodies cannot be conceived through one another because they have nothing in common. So, it makes sense to say that the “attributes” can be conceived in isolation of one another because they never overlap. This does not require, however, that they have distinct terminal ideas.

It’s natural for Spinoza to draw this contrast with Descartes. After all, for Spinoza, all routes lead to the same idea, so there’s no reason to believe that either the routes *must* be kept

in total isolation to avoid confusing intrinsically distinct terminal ideas. In other words, there is no reason to *exclude* Thought from Extension because they are the same substance. The fact that they can be conceived in isolation of one another indicates an ability of and not a requirement on our cognition. Descartes, of course, takes the termini of different routes to be ideas of distinct substances, and so requires us to *exclude* distinct ideas from one another. Otherwise, we will land in confusion.

4.2.1. Textual Evidence for the Cognitive Route Interpretation

We have seen textual evidence that Spinoza takes the attributes to be merely conceptually distinct from God and from one another. On the Cognitive Route Interpretation of conceptual distinction, the term for a particular attribute (e.g. Thought or Extension) indicates that one has come to the idea of God from a particular confused starting point, either from an idea of the effects of one's body or of one's thinking. Additional textual evidence for this interpretation, then, will take two forms: evidence that there is one idea of God at the end of each route and evidence that there are routes starting in confusion and ending in an adequate idea of God.

4.2.1.1. One Idea of God

Spinoza uses the Latin "*idea Dei*" throughout the *Ethics* to refer to the idea of God. Spinoza never uses the plural *ideae* to indicate that there are multiple ideas of God corresponding to God as conceived under distinct attributes. This alone suggests that the distinction among attributes is extrinsic to God. Otherwise, we would expect multiple *ideae* corresponding to God as conceived under distinct attributes. At 2P4, Spinoza tells us explicitly that the idea of God is "unique."

The idea of God plays a central role in Spinoza's account of knowledge and of attaining blessedness. Spinoza claims that it is the "greatest virtue" of the mind to "proceed[] from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (5P25d). An essential part of coming to master our affects is relating those affects to the idea of God (5P14).

In Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the "method" Spinoza proposes for achieving knowledge consists in "show[ing] how the mind is to be directed according the standard of a given true idea" (TIE 38). The ultimate "given true idea" sought in the TIE is the idea of the "most perfect being," or, God (ibid.). Spinoza claims that this idea is "in us" and is an "inborn tool" for seeking knowledge (39). This idea aids our minds in "reproduc[ing] completely the likeness of Nature" by "bringing all of its ideas forth from that idea which represents the source and origin of the whole of Nature" (42).

Spinoza's a posteriori proof of God's existence in the Short Treatise (I. i. I/16/1) relies on the assumption that man has "an Idea of God." Spinoza tells us that it is "clear" that man has such an idea because "he understands [God's] attributes, which he could not produce because [man] is imperfect" (I/18/6-7).⁶⁹

As Curley (1985, 429 n.54) notes, there is ambiguity about the ownership of this idea owing to the ambiguity of the genitive in the Latin. Does *idea Dei* refer to the idea *of* God or the idea *belonging to* God of God? Curley wonders whether the term *idea Dei* refers to the idea of God in God's intellect or in the human intellect.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ What seems to be Spinoza's note to this quoted passage (I/18/29) indicates that "attributes" is being used in an unofficial sense. Spinoza's examples following the quote make it clear that he means God's *propria*.

⁷⁰ In Curley's translation, the distinction is marked by the English "God's idea" to indicate the idea in the infinite intellect and "the idea of God."

Though I do not have the space to give a full defense of my reading of *idea Dei* here, there seems to be at least some evidence that the answer to Curley's question is: "both." That is, the single *idea Dei* is in both God and the human intellect, at least when the latter is thinking adequately. Spinoza tells us that "...our Mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God (by P11C); hence, it is as necessary that the mind's clear and distinct ideas are true as that God's ideas are."

Curley cites the following texts as suggestive that there is an infinite *idea Dei* in God that is not in humans: 2P3, 2P4, 2P7, 2P21. 2P3 claims that there is an idea of God that is "only in God," which Curley reads as entailing "and not in humans." However, 2P3 cites 1P15 as establishing that this idea is "only in God" and 1P15 is the general claim that "whatever is, is in God." And it appears that the idea under discussion is not just the idea of God, but also the idea of God *and* of everything ("whatever is") that follows from God. This idea of course can "only be" in God because only God has an infinite intellect. My claim is *not* that *idea Dei* at the termini of our two cognitive routes is an idea of the infinitely many things that follow from God's essence, but merely an idea of God.

At 2P4, Spinoza tells us that "infinite things follow in infinite modes" from the unique *idea Dei*. However, this is compatible with the claim that the human intellect is part of the infinite intellect insofar as it has an adequate idea of God. We can understand that everything follows from God's idea because, Spinoza claims, we know that everything follows from God on account of God's being the only substance (1P16). This does not entail our discernment of the idea of God enables us to survey *each and every* thing that follows from God. Presumably, only God's infinite intellect (2P3) can do that. This also makes sense of a similar claim in 2P7c: the knowledge *that* there is an idea of everything in God and that

those ideas follow from the idea of God does not entail that our having the idea of God requires us to have the idea of everything.

At 2P21, Spinoza does argue that the idea of God is infinite on account of its having an infinite thing as its object. However, this does not entail that a finite intellect cannot have this idea. After all, at 2P30, Spinoza writes that “[a]n actual intellect, whether finite or infinite, must comprehend God's attributes and God's affections, and nothing else.” Spinoza defends this claim by making reference to a “true idea’s” agreement with its object. As we have seen in the TIE, this “true idea” is the idea of God.

These sources of textual evidence suggest that there is a single idea of God that can be obtained by making one’s ideas more more clear and distinct.

4.2.1.2. Many Routes

The routes in the Cognitive Route Interpretation are analytic: they involve a process of making a confused idea (e.g., the idea of one’s own knowledge) more clear and distinct until one reaches a simple idea, the idea of God. Another way of expressing this is that they proceed from limitation and finitude to perfection and infinitude: for Descartes and Spinoza, the infinite is essentially simple and undivided and thus when we have clear and distinct ideas of it, those ideas must themselves be simple. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza eschews the analytical method of the *Meditations* and appears to present his metaphysics synthetically, starting from the simple idea of God and then proceeding to complex idea of the human mind and body, etc. Therefore, we don’t see many instances of explicit expression of the analytic reasoning expected by the Cognitive Route Interpretation in the *Ethics* itself.

However, we do see a brief expression of analytical reasoning in the beginning of Part II of the *Ethics*, especially where Spinoza demonstrates that Thought and Extension are

attributes of God. Spinoza obscures this reasoning somewhat in his geometrical presentation, it is clear that this analysis is present. While 2P1d employs a synthetic demonstration that God has Thought as an attribute, Spinoza argues that 2P1 can be given a different, *analytic* demonstration. He writes:

This Proposition is also evident from the fact that we can conceive an infinite thinking being. For the more things a thinking being can think, the more reality, *or* perfection, we conceive it to contain. Therefore, a being that can think infinitely many things in infinitely many ways is necessarily infinite in its power of thinking. So, since we can conceive an infinite Being by attending to thought alone, Thought (by ID4 and D6) is necessarily one of God's infinite attributes, as we maintained.

The reasoning here is nearly identical to the reasoning in the Third Meditation. Recall that Part II of the *Ethics* includes three axioms about our knowledge: Man thinks (2A2), We feel that a body is affected in many ways (2A4), and We do not perceive anything but extended and thinking modes (2A5). As stated, these axioms suggest a state of confusion—2A5 suggest that we perceive nothing but *modes*, but Spinoza will go on to argue that we can also have adequate ideas of the attributes of those modes. Perhaps the idea, then, is that in our confused state, we begin with confused knowledge of modes and then ascend to knowledge of the attributes.

2P1s goes on to take us from this confused state to God's attributes by insisting that we can conceive an infinite thinking thing. The first implicit step is that we recognize that we are limited, imperfect thinking things. The second step, now explicit, is that we can conceive

of a more perfect thinking thing. The third step establishes the link between perfection and reality, such that this conceived infinite thing doesn't exist merely potentially. And then, finally, Spinoza concludes that we can conceive an infinite Being by reflecting on Thought alone, entailing that God has Thought as an attribute. It is important to note here that Spinoza does not qualify "Being" with an attribute when he reaches his conclusion: we conceive an infinite Being and not an infinite Thinking Being. On the Cognitive Route Interpretation, this is natural: the intrinsic nature of thinking things qua thinking is not carried over to the infinite Being at the end of this route.

Spinoza goes on in 2P2 to explain that this proof works for Extension, if one makes the necessary substitutions. This suggests that this method of proving attributes, namely following a cognitive route from some confused beginning to some clear and distinct terminus, is his general method for showing that God has an attribute.

There appears to be cognitive routing implicit of Part II's discussion of the origins of knowledge, especially from 2P24-2P47. At 2P24-2P31 demonstrates that the idea of a body and the idea of a mind is initially inadequate. However, at 2P34, Spinoza indicates that there are ideas in us that are adequate and true, suggesting that our ideas of our minds and bodies, insofar as they are inadequate, are false. From 2P37 to 2P44, Spinoza gives his account of the three kinds of knowledge and suggests that knowledge is formed by forming "common notions." At 2P45, Spinoza tells us that each idea "involves" the idea of God's essence and 2P46 tells us that that idea of God's essence is adequate. Finally, Spinoza demonstrates from the proceeding that we have an adequate idea of God. The logical progression of these propositions suggests that there is a route from our inadequate ideas (of minds and bodies) to an adequate idea of God.

There are also hints of cognitive routing in Part V. At 5P14, Spinoza claims that our ideas of bodily affections can be “related to” the idea of God via forming “clear and distinct concept[s].” And at 5P30, Spinoza tells us that “[i]nsofar as our Mind knows itself and the Body under a species of eternity, it necessarily has knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God and is conceived through God.” Spinoza defines “eternity” at 5D8, which implies that knowing the body and mind “under a species of eternity” is to understand them as following from an eternal thing, God. As 2P44c2 makes clear, understanding things under the species of eternity is in the “nature of Reason”. This suggests a connection between the routing implicit in Part II and the knowledge of God that plays the central role in Part V.

There is further evidence suggesting cognitive routing in the Short Treatise. In Chapter XXII’s discussion of our ability to know God and the “union” of our minds with God, Spinoza writes,

And because the body is the very first thing our soul becomes aware of—for as we have said, there can be nothing in Nature whose Idea does not exist in the thinking thing, the idea which is the soul of that thing—that thing must, then, necessarily be the first cause of the idea.

But this Idea cannot find any rest in the knowledge of the body, without passing over into knowledge of that without which neither the body nor the Idea itself can either exist or be understood.

Here, again, Spinoza claims that we come to knowledge by seeking the cause of the idea with which we are first acquainted: the idea of a body. To understand God as the cause of the idea and of its object is to understand God via the attributes of Thought and Extension.

There is strong evidence of cognitive routing in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, where Spinoza appears to borrow Descartes' method for clarifying and distinguishing ideas to reach the idea of God (Nelson 2015 52-4, 61-3). As was noted in 4.2.1, the TIE aims to develop a method of distinguishing true from false ideas with the ultimate goal of forming a true idea of God. Spinoza tells us that this method involves "distinguishing" true ideas from "the rest of other perceptions," suggesting a process of clarification and distinction (37). We are told the idea of God, along with other true ideas, is "inborn," enabling it to be reached via this process (39). This process of "reflexive knowledge" involves understanding "ideas of ideas," that are formed by reflexive on the nature of the mind itself (39).

In the TIE, part of the process of "distinguishing" true ideas involves comprehending the causes of a given idea. Spinoza tells us that while God can be understood "through [God's] essence alone," dependent beings must be understood through their "proximate causes" (92). Like Descartes, Spinoza encourages not to seek these causes among other "singular things," since this process can be continued indefinitely and will not lead to knowledge of eternal things (100). Once we reach the idea of the being that is "the cause of all things" and understand it to be the "cause of all our ideas," "our mind will [...] reproduce Nature as much as possible" (99). These texts suggest that the idea of God can be reached by a process of clarification and distinguishing of ideas, where that process can start with any given idea (73).

Together, these texts suggest that there is cognitive routing in Spinoza.

4.3. An Objection

Objection: How can ideas of the attributes also be in the infinite intellect?

It is clear that the Cognitive Routing Interpretation cannot be an “Objective Interpretation.” Remember that on the Objective Interpretation, the distinction among attributes is mirrored in some way in God. However, on the Cognitive Routing Interpretation, the distinction is *extrinsic* to God and involved in the conception of God by a finite intellect. So, on this reading, when Spinoza claims that the attributes are what “intellect perceives of [God], as constituting its essence,” he must be referring primarily to the human intellect (1D4). I defend this reading at length elsewhere.

An Objectivist might make the following objection. At 1P30 and again at 2P7s, Spinoza claims that the infinite intellect—God’s intellect—must cognize God’s attributes. On the Cognitive Route Interpretation, the distinction between the attributes is partially confused: the attributes can be conceived to be “really distinct” because the cognitive routes to the idea of God have confused and incommensurable starting points. This “incommensurability” is a fundamental feature of the nature of human minds. However, the infinite intellect is constituted by only adequate ideas, and so its ideas of the attributes must be adequate (2P11, 2P43). So, the ideas of the attributes in the infinite intellect must have really distinct objects. Therefore, there must be something in God corresponding to these distinct ideas in the infinite intellect that is “really distinct.” This objection is natural for Objectivists about the attributes, who assume that there must be something corresponding to each of our adequate ideas of God in the infinite intellect.

This objection misunderstands the Cognitive Route Interpretation’s account of the attributes. On this interpretation, the attributes are *not* identical to cognitive routes. The attributes are strictly speaking identical to substance, or God. We ought not assume that Spinoza has a theory of reference on which each distinct term picks out some distinct entity

in his ontology. The idea is that we use the term “attribute” or the names for the particular attributes to communicate the fact that we arrived at the idea of God via some Cognitive Route. For example, “Thought” is just a name for the idea of God that is the terminus of a cognitive route beginning in a confused idea of our own thinking. For the sage who has traveled the routes starting at confused ideas of thinking and the affections of the body, “Thought” and “Extension” correspond to the *same idea* occurring in to temporally distinct instances. Therefore, there is no multiplicity of attributes to be grounded in God’s essence.

On the Cognitive Route Interpretation, “the infinite intellect has an adequate idea of the attributes” is to be understood as the claim that “the intellect has an adequate idea of *what we call* ‘the attributes’.” In other words, the infinite intellect has the adequate idea of God that is at the terminus of *our* distinct cognitive routes. This does not entail that the infinite intellect itself had to travel distinct cognitive routes to apprehend God: that is clearly impossible given that the routes themselves essentially involve confused ideas. However, we cannot conceive of God except via some cognitive route. We do not have direct access to the idea of God in that sense. Therefore, we cannot conceive how the infinite intellect manages to conceive God without the use of some route. Spinoza never claims that we can. All Spinoza claims is that the infinite intellect has an adequate idea of God.

The demonstration of 1P30 is naturally read this way:

Dem.: A true idea must agree with its *object* (by A6), i.e. (as is known through itself), what is contained objectively in the intellect must necessarily be in nature. But in nature (by P14C1) there is *only one substance*, viz. God... Therefore, an actual intellect, whether finite or infinite, must comprehend *God's attributes*... (my emphasis)

Notice how Spinoza slides from a proof about the single object of the relevant true idea—an idea of the one substance, God—to the claim that any intellect must comprehend God’s (multiple) attributes. This proof only makes sense if God is identical to the attributes and if the true idea of God just is the true idea of the attributes. There is no implication that there are multiple ideas of the attributes corresponding to an extra-intellectual distinction of some kind between them.

4.4. Solutions to the Puzzles

4.4.1. The Identity Puzzle

On the current interpretation, God and God’s attributes are strictly identical. The same is true of the attributes themselves. The latter, however, can be conceived to be “really distinct.” This means that one can conceive God either with a route starting with a confused idea of one’s body or a confused idea of one’s mind. In either case, if these confused ideas are clarified and made distinct, one can reach an idea of an infinite being. Though confused origins of this idea distinguish the routes one takes to the idea of God, it is intrinsically the same idea of God at the terminus of each route. The distinct terms for distinct attributes signify the conceptual origins of the idea of God, and not something intrinsic to God.

4.4.2. The Simplicity Puzzle

Again, on the Cognitive Route Interpretation, there is a single idea of God at the end of each cognitive route. As Spinoza makes clear in the TIE, the idea itself is “simple” (72, II/27/29). The simplicity of the idea can be understood in a strict sense: there is nothing intrinsically complex about the idea itself. It does not have “aspects” that can be “selectively attended to.” But if the true idea of God is simple, then there is no pressure to say that God is “divided” in any sense. What is “divided” is our ways of conceiving God.

CHAPTER 3: COULD SPINOZA UNDERSTAND HIS OWN THEORY OF GOD'S ATTRIBUTES?

1. Introduction

One of the central goals of Spinoza's philosophy is to render God cognizable.⁷¹ Spinoza argues that God is cognizable through what he calls God's "attributes," which he defines as "what intellect perceives of [God] as constituting its essence" (1D4). Spinoza's theory of God's attributes includes views about (1) *how* the intellect comes to perceive God's essence via these attributes and (2) *what* God's attributes are, at least insofar as they are understood by the intellect.⁷² Because Spinoza believed that God is an infinite substance (1D6) of which everything else is merely a dependent "mode" (1D5), or way that God *is*, Spinoza's theory of God's attributes is really a theory about the fundamental nature of reality itself. And, crucially, it is a theory that is intended to make the fundamental nature of reality cognizable.⁷³

⁷¹ As Della Rocca (2008, 1) writes "Spinoza's philosophy is characterized by perhaps the boldest and most thoroughgoing commitment ever to appear in the history of philosophy to the intelligibility of everything. For Spinoza, no why-question is off limits, each why-question—in principle—admits of a satisfactory answer." We can see Spinoza's commitment to intelligibility through his text: see in the *Ethics* e.g., 1App, 2P47, 5P30. If one believes that Spinoza seeks intelligibility via explanation, as Della Rocca (*ibid.*) does, one might also cite apparent instances of the Principle of Sufficient Reason like 1A2. I do not have any commitments to how Spinoza renders things explicable. I will use the term "cognizable" to mean the ability of a mind to *think* something, which includes but is not limited to *knowing*, *imagining*, and *believing* something.

⁷² See especially 2P1 and 2P2. See also 1P30, 2P40, 2P47 and 5P30.

⁷³ I will not be using "theory" in any technical sense here. By "theory," I mean a collection of commitments intended to explain something. By "commitments," I mean beliefs formed by a process of rational, theoretical inquiry.

Spinoza argues that humans perceive God's essence as constituted by the attributes of Thought and Extension. In other words, Spinoza believes that humans understand God to be essentially a thinking thing and a material thing. And because the rest of reality is just a way that God is, the rest of reality also consists fundamentally of beings that are mental and beings that are material. For us, God is an infinite thinking and extended substance and everything else that depends on God is either a mode of Thought or a mode of Extension. Humans cannot conceive the fundamental nature of reality except via these two attributes, Spinoza argues. There is no way for us to transcend the division of the world into the mental and the material to see how it "really is" or how it could otherwise be.⁷⁴

Nearly all of his interpreters commit Spinoza to the view that what humans cognize of God's essence is distinct from what God's essence is *in itself* or *apart from* the limited conception of humans. That is, they argue that Spinoza's theory of God's attributes entails that God is not wholly cognizable to human beings. For example, most interpreters argue that God has attributes in addition to Thought and Extension that humans cannot cognize.

The popular view that Spinoza is committed to the existence of uncognizable aspects of reality has led to a number of disputes in the literature about the coherency of Spinoza's metaphysics. However, as far as I can tell, none of these interpreters has asked themselves the following question about their interpretations of Spinoza's theory of God's attributes: could Spinoza *himself* have understood his own theory of the attributes on their interpretations, given how he characterizes the limits of human understanding in that theory? Is theory of the attributes *itself* cognizable to human beings by its own lights? It seems to me

⁷⁴ Or so I will argue is Spinoza's view in Section 3.1.

that nearly every interpretation of Spinoza's theory of the attributes must answer "no" to these questions. In other words, nearly every interpretation is committed to the view that human beings in principle cannot cognize Spinoza's theory of the attributes.

This would be a disastrous result. After all, it is the consensus even among these interpreters that the central goal of Spinoza's philosophy is to render reality cognizable to human beings, even if only partially so. The goal of the *Ethics*, after all, is to show that there is a path to human blessedness that starts with an adequate understanding of God via its attributes. However, on almost every contemporary interpretation, not only is *God* not wholly cognizable to us, Spinoza's *own theory* is not wholly cognizable to us by its own lights.

This catastrophic consequence follows from a general approach to Spinoza's metaphysics that is nearly mandatory in the secondary literature. Most interpreters are committed to the view that Spinoza constructed his metaphysics from what I call God's Perspective.⁷⁵ On this approach, Spinoza theorized about the fundamental nature of reality by somehow channeling the perfect, unlimited, transcendental perspective of an infinite being. Spinoza's main project was to describe the world as it "really" is and not how it "appears" to a small subclass of finite beings, humans. As a result, they hold that Spinoza committed himself to the existence of aspects of reality that are essentially uncognizable to human beings. They are committed to the view that Spinoza's metaphysics violates what I call the **Cognizability Condition**.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ This terminology is loosely based on Putnam's (1990). One might also call it the "View from Nowhere," as Nagel (1986) does.

⁷⁶ A more precise, but verbose way of stating the **Condition** would be: "'Everything', insofar as that word has meaning, is cognizable." On the Human Perspective Interpretation, we will see, the Condition is ultimately revealed to be a truism. However, one with a God's Perspective Interpretation might understand it to be an endorsement of (a possibly objectionable) form of Idealism. I do not support the latter reading because I do not

Cognizability Condition: Everything is cognizable by human beings.

God's Perspective Interpretations include all of the interpretations that fall under the familiar interpretative dichotomy of Subjective and Objective Interpretations of the attributes.⁷⁷ The former class of interpretations understands our perception of the attributes to be illusive. On a Subjective Interpretation, God has a "real essence" that is uncognizable to finite beings. The "attributes" are just fictions or wholly subjective categories created by the human mind in its attempts to understand God.

The latter class of interpretations understands the intellect's perceptions of the attributes to be *accurate*: God "really is" a Thinking and Extended thing. In fact, what it is to be an "attribute" in the first place is to be what *God's* intellect perceives of its own essence. Because Objectivists understand the attributes to be what God, an infinite being, perceives of its own essence, these interpreters also adopt the view that God has attributes *other* than those which human beings perceive. On these interpretations, there are infinitely many attributes that are not cognizable by human beings in addition to the two that are.

Most of the debates about how to interpret Spinoza's theory of God's attributes begin with the premise that some form of the Objective Interpretation is correct: no contemporary reader believes that the attributes are merely subjective.⁷⁸ One of the central problems for

take Spinoza to think that quantificational terms like "everything" or highly general metaphysical terms like "reality" to refer to ideas other than those that can be had by human minds. See Section 4.3.

⁷⁷ The distinction between "Objective" and "Subjective" interpretations was introduced by Wolfson (1934,v.1,146). Wolfson, as far as I know, is the only interpreter who endorses a Subjective Interpretation.

⁷⁸ The following is a partial list of supporters of the Objective Interpretation, each of whom is cited at the end of this dissertation: Allison, Ariew, Bennett, Curley, Delahunty, Deleuze, Della Rocca, Donagan, Garrett, Gueroult, Haserot, Huebner, Joachim, Laerke, Lin, Martens, Melamed, Morrison, Nadler, Newlands, Parkinson, Radner.

Objectivists is to explain how the world of thinking things relates to the world of extended things: Spinoza argues that God and its modes are “one and the same” no matter which attribute they are conceived through. One popular subclass of Objective Interpretation, Attribute-Neutral Interpretations, argue that the material and mental worlds are united in virtue of having “attribute-neutral” properties in common or in virtue of being different ways of conceiving the same “attribute-neutral” reality.”

The main thesis of this chapter is that, no matter what the details divide them, all God’s Perspective Interpretations understand Spinoza’s philosophy to violate the **Cognizability Condition** in two ways. First, they commit Spinoza to the existence of beings that humans cannot cognize. These beings include the Subjectivist’s “real essence” of God, the Objectivist’s “other attributes,” and “attribute-neutral” aspects of reality. This is already in conflict with Spinoza’s apparent desire to render God cognizable to humans. Second, they commit Spinoza to the uncognizability of his own theory. Regardless of whether one thinks that Spinoza’s main goal was to render God cognizable and whether one thinks that he was successful at that goal, they should surely agree that his own *theory* ought to be cognizable to its intended audience.

Nevertheless, Spinoza’s theory is not doomed to self-defeat. At the end of this chapter, I will show how what I call the Human Perspective Interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of the attributes, which takes attributes to be the ways what *we* conceive God, is

” For example, see Bennett (1984, 143-9), Della Rocca (1996, 118-71), Donagan (1989, 6-7), Gueroult (*Spinoza I*, 338–9) and Newlands (2010) and (2012), Morrison (2017).

immune to worries about self-defeat. If we understand that the attributes are what *we accurately* conceive of God's essence, then Spinoza's theory is cognizable by human beings.

I will begin by describing and briefly motivating each of the God's Perspective Interpretations.

2. The Rival Interpretations and their Commitments

2.1. God's Perspective Interpretations

I will use the label "God's Perspective Interpretation" to refer to any interpretation that takes Spinoza's metaphysics to violate the **Cognizability Condition**.

God's Perspective Interpretation Spinoza denies that everything is cognizable by humans.

To be clear, I mean "cognizable" *according to Spinoza's theory of cognition*, contained largely in Part II of the *Ethics*. Whether Spinoza countenances certain aspects of reality that are cognizable on a contemporary theory of cognition is of no interest to us here.

I will not discuss every interpretation that I consider to be a God's Perspective Interpretation here. However, I will discuss interpretations that give rival and, at least relatively speaking, plausible accounts of Spinoza's theory of God's attributes. However, my remarks here are intended to be general: the ultimate conclusion is that *any* interpretation that takes Spinoza's metaphysics to violate the **Cognizability Condition** is subject to this objection.

2.1.1. The Subjective and Objective Interpretations

I discussed and characterized the Subjective and Objective Interpretations at length in Chapter 1. I will give provide a brief reminder of their commitments here.

Subjective Interpretation (SI): God has a “real essence” that humans cannot cognize.

Wolfson’s Subjective Interpretation holds that the attributes humans perceive God as having are “illusory” or “merely subjective.” Though we perceive God to be a thinking and extended substance, God is not “in reality” either of those. Instead, God has a “real essence” that we fundamentally misrepresent.⁸⁰

Objective Interpretation (OI): God has attributes other than Thought and Extension.

Strictly speaking, the core idea behind **OI** is that our perception of God’s essence is accurate. God “really is” a thinking and extended thing. However, attributes are not merely what *humans* perceive of God’s essence. Instead, the attributes are what *God* perceives of God’s essence. The accuracy of our perception is grounded in the fact we perceive God’s essence the way that God does. Because we are finite beings, we have merely a finite grasp of God’s essence. God, in other words, has infinitely many attributes distinct from Thought and Extension which humans cannot perceive. The infinity of these attributes is not the focus of the current discussion: the central commitment is God’s having at least one attribute other than the humanly cognizable attributes.⁸¹

⁸⁰ See Wolfson (v.1, 112-21, 142-57).

⁸¹ The “objectivity” of the attributes will also not be under discussion. See my “The Identity of Substance and Its Distinct Attributes in Spinoza” for a discussion of the problems endemic to an “objective” understanding of the attributes.

2.1.2. Attribute-Neutral Interpretations

There is a third class of God's Perspective Interpretation which does not necessarily fall into either the Subjective or Objective Category. Though those who adopt what I'll call an "Attribute-Neutral Interpretation" typically do so in order to solve problems introduced by the Objective Interpretation, their commitment to "other attributes" will not be my focus here. Instead, I am interested in their commitment to "attribute-neutral" or "trans-attribute" entities. For example, some authors invoke the existence of "attribute-neutral" modes and relations, others talk about shared "attribute-neutral properties".

As far as I can tell, there are two kinds of Attribute-Neutral Interpretations on offer in the current secondary literature. The first kind is the Substratum View, on which attribute-neutral entities are like substrata that can instantiate the attributes and properties specific to those attributes. The second is the Overlap View, on which attribute-neutral properties and are had by entities, regardless of which attribute those entities fall under.

The primary motivation for adopting an Attribute-Neutral Interpretation is making sense of Spinoza's claim, discussed in Chapter 2, that both God and its modes are "one and the same" no matter which attribute they are conceived under. In what sense is the thinking God, the cause of all minds and their ideas "one and the same" as the extended God, the cause of bodies? Those who adopt Attribute-Neutral Interpretations argue that both God and its modes are "numerically" identical, even if they can be conceived to be "qualitatively" distinct. The primary difference between the Substratum and Overlap Views is how they secure numerical identity across attributes.

2.1.2.1. The Substratum View

There are several of interpretations that count as invoking the Substratum View. I will focus on Bennett's view as an example (1984, 143-9).⁸² In his discussion of the attributes, Bennett introduces the notion of "trans-attribute" differentia. We can get a tentative grip on what these "differentia" are by considering a mode with its attributes "peeled off" (142). That is, we ignore those properties belonging to a mode that are the result of its following from an attribute. For example, we might try to conceive of a mode of Extension without its size, shape, color, quantity of motion and rest, and so on. What's left is the trans-attribute mode with only its trans-attribute properties.

Bennett argues that trans-attribute modes are neither essentially nor intrinsically characterized by the attributes. They can however instantiate or "combine" with Thought, Extension, or some other attribute, to "produce" a mode of that attribute (*ibid.*). When the trans-attribute entities are conceived through attributes, they instantiate attribute-specific properties (62-3). For example, a trans-attribute mode *x* can combine with Thought to produce an idea. And this mode, conceived as an idea, will have various properties that only thinking things can have: indivisibility, for instance. However, that same mode can also combine with Extension and any other attributes and instantiate wholly different properties. The idea is that the conception of that trans-attribute mode imbues it with attribute-specific properties. A mode of Thought and a mode of Extension, for example, are "one and the

⁸² Donagan, for example, posits the existence of attribute-neutral laws of nature that are metaphysically prior to the attribute-laden world (1989, 96-7). On his view, these attribute-neutral laws of nature (specifically of immanent and transient causation) produce and structure the parallel causal networks described by 2P7. That is, the explanation for Spinoza's parallelism is that the parallel modal realities are generated by a single collection of laws of nature that are neutral with respect to the attributes. Donagan's view, then, is an example of the substratum strategy.

same” because they are distinct ways of conceiving a single attribute-neutral mode which thereby take on attribute-specific properties depending on under which attribute it is conceived.

The Substratum View can be extended to any number of entities in Spinoza’s system. Bennett’s preferred example is of “trans-attribute” modes, but one could easily apply the same idea to God itself or the relations that hold among the different parts of Spinoza’s ontology. The core idea is that there is a metaphysically basic substratum that is not intrinsically characterized by the attributes but which can instantiate the attributes when it is conceived in different ways. The attributes are like “lenses” through which this substratum is viewed.⁸³

2.1.2.2. The Overlap View

Della Rocca (1996) is the most prominent defender of the Overlap View.⁸⁴ His attribute-neutral entities are properties and relations. However, unlike Bennett, Della Rocca does not claim that his attribute-neutral entities are substrata. Instead, Della Rocca argues that attribute-neutral properties are the properties that *both* material and mental entities have.

To understand the Overlap View, one needs to be clear about the difference between attribute-neutral and what I’ll call attribute-specific properties.⁸⁵ For example, consider my

⁸³ Note that I am not claiming that Bennett believes the differentia to be *substances*. By “substratum,” I merely mean a being that is not intelligible *in itself* but is made intelligible via its properties.

⁸⁴ Another example is Newlands’ view that the “conceiving-through” relation is attribute-neutral (2012).

⁸⁵ This division corresponds to Della Rocca’s division between intensional (attribute-specific) and extensional (attribute-neutral) properties (132-40). Cashing out the difference in this way will take us too far afield from the current project. Della Rocca employs this division in part to explain why attribute contexts are “referentially opaque.” In other words, he wants to reconcile the numerical identity of substance and mode given that when conceived under distinct attributes, substance and mode cannot be conceived to be identical. For example, Della Rocca wants to make sense of apparently contradictory claims that minds and bodies are both “really distinct”

mind, a mode of Thought, and my body, a mode of Extension. My mind has a number of properties in virtue of being a thinking thing: it represents a body, it has no breadth or depth, it cannot move or be moved, and so on. My body has a number of properties in virtue of being extended: it has a height and a width, it has a shape, it can move and be moved. In each case, these are properties that something can have only in virtue of falling under an attribute. These are attribute-specific properties.

By contrast, attribute-neutral properties are those properties that an entity can have regardless of which attribute it falls under. Della Rocca gives the following examples of attribute-neutral properties: the number of causes and effects that each mode has, temporal properties like duration, the property of being simple or complex, and so on (134). One could add the properties of being a mode or substance, being self-identical, etc. Both modes of Thought and Extension, for example, have these properties. My mind has a particular duration that is identical to the duration of my body. Both my mind and body are self-identical, modes, complex, etc. These attribute-neutral properties overlap the worlds of the different attributes.

Attribute-neutral properties are thought to be useful for securing the numerical identity of modes across attributes because parallel modes have all the same attribute-neutral properties.⁸⁶ In fact, Della Rocca argues that the notion of parallelism can be captured in terms of shared attribute-neutral properties because the attribute-neutral properties secure the

and “one and the same”. His argument is that they are really distinct with respect to their intensional properties—in the way that Hesperus is distinct from Phosphorus—and identical with respect to their extensional properties—in that these are two ways of presenting the same referent. Della Rocca did not need to attribute this 20th century apparatus to Spinoza to make his main claims, so I will avoid confusion by not doing so here.

⁸⁶ Della Rocca writes, “Thus a mode of extension and the parallel mode of thought share all of their neutral properties” (136),

“place” that parallel modes occupy in the infinite causal network, the “order and connection” that is “the same” between ideas and things in 2P7 (ibid.). Let me explain.

Spinoza argues at 1P28 that each mode, regardless of which attribute it falls under, exists in an infinite causal network. My body, for example, is an ultimate effect of an infinite number of other prior modes that serve as partial causes of my body. And my body is and will be the partial cause of an infinite number of effects. My body has a “place” in the infinite causal order of connected extended modes: it has a certain collection of causes and effects that are unique to it. My mind also has a “place” in the infinite causal order of connected thinking modes. In each case, this “place” is defined in attribute-neutral terms, my body’s place in its causal network can be described by numbers of causes and effects, a particular duration, and so on. The core idea behind the Overlap View is that my mind and body are numerically identical in virtue of having exactly the same “place” in their parallel causal orders. Their numerical identity consists in their having identical attribute-neutral properties.

The proposal here is *not* that the attribute-specific properties instantiated by substrata characterized by attribute-neutral properties. Attribute-neutral properties are also not to be understood as metaphysically prior to the attribute-specific properties just because they are numerically the same across attributes.

The following are the commitments of the two kinds of Attribute-Neutral Interpretations I’ll discuss here.

AN_s: There are “trans-attribute” substrata.

AN_o: There are “attribute-neutral” properties common to both Thinking and Extended things.

3. Why these are God's Perspective Interpretations

I have not yet justified the label “God's Perspective Interpretation” in detail because I have not shown how each of the Objective, Subjective, and Attribute-Neutral Interpretations violate the **Cognizability Condition**. In this section, I will argue that defining commitments of these interpretations—abbreviated as **OI**, **SI**, **AN_s**, and **AN_o**—is a commitment to something that humans cannot cognize, on Spinoza's theory of human cognition. Specifically, I will argue that humans cannot cognize *particular* things that meet the descriptions given by these abbreviations, on Spinoza's theory of human cognition. For example, we cannot, according to Spinoza, cognize particular attributes other than Thought and Extension.

3.1. Spinoza's Master Argument

I will now reconstruct what I'll call Spinoza's Master Argument against the cognizability of particular entities described by **SI**, **SI**, **OA**, **AN_s**, and **AN_o**. That argument can be reconstructed from an epistolary exchange between Spinoza and Walther von Tschirnhaus in Letters 63-66. The main topic of discussion in these letters is the cognizability of attributes other than Thought and Extension. Spinoza's interlocutor, Tschirnhaus, believes Spinoza is committed to **OA** and is suspicious of the “other attributes.” His specific worry is our apparent ignorance of them: if we are “one and the same” as some mode of attribute₇₈: why is it that we are aware only of modes of Thought (e.g., our ideas) and modes of Extension (i.e., the parts of our body), he asks. Across two letters, Spinoza gives a lengthy “proof” that we cannot cognize the other attributes. My claim is that this argument, when extended with a premise that Spinoza explicitly endorses (from 1P10s), suffices to rule out the cognizability

of God's purported "real essence" and "attribute-neutral" entities as well as "other attributes."

One brief note about terminology: the argument here is expressed in terms whether or not we can "conceive[*concipio*]," "perceive [*perceptio*]," or "know[*cognitio*]" certain attributes. Each of these terms describes a specific way that we can have ideas. Spinoza uses "perception" to indicate that the mind is passive with respect to some idea and "conceiving" to indicate that the mind's activity is involved in some idea (2D3Exp). "Knowing" is just a way of conceiving ideas for Spinoza. The ultimate upshot of the Master Argument is that we can neither perceive, conceive, or know other attributes, and so on. I'm going to use the term "cognize" to mean "having an idea" in general, without regard for its origin or epistemic status. The Master Argument, then, is an argument showing the ideas that humans can have *tout court*. For that reason, it is a particularly strong argument, because it concludes that we can in no sense *think* the ideas corresponding to **SI**₁, **SI**₂, **OA**, **AN**_s, and **AN**_o.

3.1.1. Reconstructing the Master Argument

3.1.1.1. Letter 63 (July 25, 1675) from Schuller to Spinoza

In a letter written on Tschirnhaus' behalf, Schuller put the following "doubt" to Spinoza:

First, would you please, Sir, convince us by some positive proof, not by a reduction to impossibility, that We cannot know more attributes of God than thought and extension? Furthermore, does it follow from this that, in contrast to us, creatures consisting of those other attributes cannot conceive extension? In this way, it would seem that there must be as many worlds established as there are attributes of God" (IV/274a/20-IV/275a10).

The two doubts here reveal that Tschirnhaus (and presumably Schuller) believed Spinoza to have committed to the existence of more attributes than Thought and Extension. Because, for Spinoza, infinitely many modes follow from each attribute (1P16), Tschirnhaus assumes that there must be an infinite number of “creatures” that belong to these additional attributes. These creatures must inhabit different “worlds” than ours on account of their following from different attributes.

Tschirnhaus expresses his doubt in the form of two questions asked from the human perspective and the perspective of an alien “creature” respectively. (1) Why can humans not know the other attributes? (2) Are there other creatures—modes of one of the hidden attributes—that cannot conceive Extension, one of the attributes we know? While the second question displays one of the oddities of the existence of other attributes, namely that it requires Spinoza to believe in alien creatures that don’t suspect that we exist, it is not our main focus here.

According to Tschirnhaus, Spinoza believes both that there are other attributes and that humans cannot know them. However, Tschirnhaus sees no explanation or “proof” of this fact in Spinoza’s system. Spinoza, the objection goes, cannot give a positive demonstration explaining why we do not know these other attributes.

Here, I don’t think Tschirnhaus honestly believed that he *could* perceive other attributes and was requesting proof that he in fact could not. The doubt being raised is that Spinoza owes us an explanation of our ignorance of the fantastical-sounding “other worlds” filled with alien creatures of other attributes. This epistemic doubt is intended to be a kind of *modus tollens* of the proposition that there are such worlds, and thus such attributes, in the first place.

3.1.1.2. Letter 64 (July 29, 1675) from Spinoza to Schuller

Spinoza's reply to this doubt consists in a complex positive proof concluding with the claim that we cannot conceive attributes other than Thought and Extension. Spinoza expresses the proof in a somewhat convoluted way, so I will reconstruct it in order and with a standardized vocabulary.

- (1) The power (ability) of each thing is defined solely by its essence. (3P7)
- (2) The essence of the human mind is that it is the idea of a particular body. (2P13)
- (3) Therefore, the mind's ability to know extends to (a) what this idea involves or (b) what can be inferred from (a).
- (4) The object of the mind, i.e., the body has God as a cause only insofar as God is extended (2P6).
- (5) The idea of the *body*, therefore, involves knowledge of God only insofar as God is extended (1A6).
- (6) The mind itself has God as a cause only insofar as God is thinking (2P6).
- (7) The idea of the *mind*, therefore, involves knowledge of God only insofar as God is thinking (1A6).
- (8) Therefore, the mind involves knowledge of God as an extended and thinking thing only.
- (9) No attribute from God can be inferred from another attribute or its modes. (1P10)
- (10) Therefore, the human mind cannot know attributes other than Thought and Extension.

The crucial propositions Spinoza cites in this proof are 2P13, 2P6, and 1P10. Here are those propositions:

1P10: Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself.

2P6: The modes of each attribute have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other attribute.

2P13: The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else.

1P10 rules out the possibility that attributes can be conceived through or the cause of one another. 2P6 applies this claim to the modes of those attributes insofar as they are caused by God. For example, God can be conceived as a cause of bodies only insofar as God is an extended thing. There is no cross-attribute causation for Spinoza.⁸⁷ God, conceived as an extended thing, cannot be understood to be the cause of any ideas, for example. The conceived separation between the mental and physical, and for Tschirnhaus, between the “worlds” of different attributes, is foundational for Spinoza.

2P13 states Spinoza’s view on the metaphysical relationship between mind and body. For Spinoza, minds and bodies are not separate, causally interactive substances. 1P10 rules out the possibility of any interaction between minds and bodies. Spinoza famously argues in 2P13 and its preceding propositions that a mind is an *idea* of a body: minds exist in a solely *representational* relationship to bodies. They neither cause the activities of bodies nor are they passively affected by bodies. Minds merely represent bodies via ideas.

Spinoza’s proof begins with an exhaustive characterization of the knowledge that a human mind can have. The mind can know only what it “involves” and “what can be inferred” from what it involves. This characterization requires clarification.

⁸⁷ 1A5 and 1P2. Attributes have nothing in common with one another and so cannot enter into causal relations.

Spinoza makes it clear that what the mind, the idea of the body, *involves* is what that idea “contains in itself.” According to Spinoza, the mind is not a simple idea of a body but is rather an aggregate of ideas of all of the different interacting parts that compose the human body. For Spinoza, these ideas are not the sum total of the sensory representations corresponding to the relevant changes the body undergoes in its interaction with external things. The mind is not identical to what Spinoza calls the imagination. (He is not an Empiricist.) Included in the mind are ideas that arise from the activity of the intellect, which we might characterize as the faculty of the mind responsible for “conceptual” behavior.

Spinoza says that the mind “involves” the attributes of Extension and Thought because its ideas include ideas of God conceived under those attributes. For example, at least insofar as it has clear and distinct ideas, the mind conceives of the body as being (ultimately) caused by an infinite extended thing (e.g., 2P2). The idea of the body as having a causal history tracing to God is not the product of mere sensation. It is rather the product of the intellect’s apprehension of the body as a finite effect of an infinite extended substance.

Spinoza argues on these grounds that the idea of the body “involves” Extension because God is the cause of the body insofar as God is an extended thing and thus the idea of the body includes its causal origins in God. The same is true of the mind: the idea of the mind, an idea of an idea also in the mind itself, “involves” Thought because the mind is conceived as caused by God insofar as God is a thinking thing. If the human mind can know other attributes, therefore, it must be that the mind can “infer or conceive” other attributes from these two attributes and their modes.

1P10 rules out this possibility straightway. Just as Thought and Extension cannot be conceived through one another, no other attributes can be conceived through either Thought or

Extension. The same follows for the modes of these attributes (2P6): just as bodies cannot be conceived through minds, modes of attribute, cannot be conceived through bodies or minds. Therefore, attributes other than Thought and Extension are neither contained in the mind, i.e., the idea of the body or can they be inferred from the idea of the body.

Before we turn to Tschirnhaus' reply it is worth noting that while Spinoza's argument is aimed at the *knowledge* of other attributes, the premises from the *Ethics* that Spinoza appeals to would have allowed him to demonstrate an even stronger claim. It's not just that humans cannot *know* the other attributes. Spinoza could have argued that we cannot *conceive* the other attributes. That is, we cannot have ideas of the other attributes at all.

For Spinoza, this might have appeared to have been a distinction not worth making in his letter, especially given the context of Tschirnhaus' question. Both Spinoza and Tschirnhaus move freely between "knowing" (*cognoscere*) and "conceiving" (*concipere*). This is to be expected: for Spinoza, knowing is just a way of conceiving (2P40s2). Or, better, "knowledge" is a term that Spinoza uses for ideas that are produced by "reason" or the intellect, rather than imagination.

However, for the contemporary reader, who, for example, might have a propositional model of knowledge, is worth stressing the strength of Spinoza's argument here. Spinoza's conclusion that we cannot know the other attributes amounts to the conclusion that we can in no sense *think* the other attributes in particular. We cannot form any kind of representation of each of them in particular whatsoever. Spinoza is not endorsing the weaker claim that we can, for example, understand what another attribute is and yet be ignorant of whether there are such things. Spinoza is not saying that we can understand the proposition "There are other attributes" and yet doubt whether it is true. Spinoza is claiming that we cannot entertain

the notion of another attribute in the first place. These attributes lie outside the boundaries of human thought entirely.

In other words, we could replace the instances of knowledge in the argument above with conception and reach the strong conclusion that the human mind cannot conceive attributes other than Thought and Extension.

3.1.1.3. Letter 65 (August 12, 1675) from Tschirnhaus to Spinoza

Tschirnhaus did not find this reply to be satisfactory. He wrote a brief reply to Spinoza's "positive proof" described above. First, Tschirnhaus asks why we cannot *perceive* more attributes than Thought or Extension. This is a strictly separate question from whether we can *conceive* other attributes. Spinoza (and presumably Tschirnhaus) reserve the word "perceive" for the mind's passive reception of some idea. "Conceive" is reserved for the activity of the intellect.

Strictly speaking, we both perceive and conceive Thought and Extension. We conceive the attributes, as 2P1 and 2P2 suggest, by conceiving of an infinite thinking and extended being that is the cause of our minds and bodies. However, we don't merely conceive the attributes. That is, they are not somehow the sole product of the activity of our minds. The attributes are not mind-dependent illusions, in other word, as some interpreters have suggested. We perceive the attributes because we perceive their modes (2A5). We perceive the attribute of Extension, for example, insofar as we perceive the affections of our bodies (2A4).

Tschirnhaus' use of "perceives" suggests that his primary interest is in the first part of Spinoza's proof, wherein he claims to show that the mind does not "involve" or "contain in itself" the idea of any other attributes. That is, his focus is not on what can be "inferred" or

“conceived” from the contents of the human mind. Therefore, his focus appears to be on 2P13 rather than 1P10 or 2P6.

Tschirnhaus elaborates on his worry by arguing that 2P7, Spinoza’s proposition establishing the so-called “parallelism” of the attributes, is compatible with our having knowledge of the other attributes. He gives the following argument:

Although I gather from [2P7s] that the world is certainly unique, still it’s no less clear also from that [2P7s] that it is expressed in infinite ways, and therefore each singular thing is expressed in infinite ways. From this it seems to follow that the Modification which constitutes my Mind and the Modification which expresses my Body, although it’s one and the same Modification, is nevertheless expressed in infinite ways, in one way through Thought, in another through Extension, in a third through an attribute of God unknown to me, and so on to infinity (since there are infinitely many Attributes of God, and the Order and Connection of the Modifications seems to be the same in all).

From this, now, the Question arises why the Mind, which represents a certain Modification, a Modification expressed not only in Extension, but also in infinite other ways, why, I ask, does the Mind perceive only the Modification expressed through Extension, i.e., the human Body, and no other expression through other attributes? (IV/279/14-29)

For Tschirnhaus, the text of 2P7s suggests that (1) there are other attributes (2) that there are infinitely many of them (3) that each attribute has infinitely many modes that (4) exist in the same “order and connection” as each other and as the modes of the familiar attributes

because (5) they are “one and the same” although “expressed” in different attributes. To be fair to Tschirnhaus, the text of 2P7s does invite this reading. As we saw in Chapter 1, many of Spinoza’s contemporary interpreters regularly cite 2P7 as definitive evidence that he believed in the existence of other attributes. For example, Spinoza writes in 2P7s:

Therefore, whether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, i.e., that the same things follow one another.

And later,

Hence, so long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of nature, or the connection of causes, through the attribute of Thought alone. And insofar as they are considered as modes of Extension, the order of the whole of nature must be explained through the attribute of Extension alone. I understand the same concerning other attributes.

Given how Tschirnhaus reads 2P7s, it’s very natural to wonder why we don’t perceive the other attributes. The human mind is just an idea of a particular mode of Extension, a body. 2P7s entails that that body is “one and the same” the idea of that body. It also entails that the body is “one and the same” as some mode of each of the “other attributes.” Since the mind is the idea of the body (2P13) and therefore perceives everything that goes on in the body (2P12), and the body is “one and the same” as a mode of attribute, why does the mind not perceive anything of that mode as well? And by extension, why doesn’t the mind perceive any of the infinitely many modes that are “one and the same” as the body?

It seems most natural to read Tschirnhaus' reply here as a restatement of the original question he asked via Schuller. After all, Spinoza's reply to the original statement of the question does not seem to be relevant to Tschirnhaus' question here. In Spinoza's original reply, he cites 2P13 to establish that the mind "contains in itself" only the idea of the body. In other words, Spinoza offers as a premise that the mind is the idea of only of the body and is thus constituted wholly by ideas of the parts of the body. Tschirnhaus wonders why this is true, especially given that the body is "one and the same" as a mode of an attribute other than Extension. What Tschirnhaus seems to be seeing, then, is an apparent conflict between (his reading) of 2P7s and 2P13. This is appropriate because Spinoza himself cites 2P7s in Letter 64 as a means by which Tschirnhaus could remove his doubts about the "other worlds" that we do not know.

3.1.1.4. Letter 66: Spinoza to Tschirnhaus

Unfortunately, we do not have a direct reply to this further question from Spinoza himself. As Curley notes, what we have of Letter 66 appears to be merely a fragment of a longer letter. Here is Spinoza's reply:

For the rest, to reply to your Objection, I say that 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, since each of the infinite ideas has no connection with any other, as I've explained in the Scholium to 2P7, and as is evident from 1P10. If you attend just a bit to these things, you'll see that that there is no remaining difficulty, etc.

This reply is difficult to parse and requires some interpretation. It reads most naturally in the following way.

- (1) There are infinitely many modes that are different expressions of one and the same thing.
- (2) For example, if a, b are parallel modes of Extension and attribute, then $a=b$. The same is true for infinitely many additional parallel modes.
- (3) There is an idea corresponding to each of these modes in the infinite intellect.
- (4) So, there are modes of Thought, call them $\text{idea}(a)$, $\text{idea}(b)$, in the infinite intellect.
- (5) These ideas “have no connection” with one another.
- (6) Therefore, they cannot constitute the mind of a singular thing.
- (7) Therefore, $\text{idea}(a)$ and $\text{idea}(b)$ are minds of distinct singular things.

Spinoza suggests that (5) follows from 1P10 and is explained in 2P7s. He must be referring to the following passage:

Hence, so long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of nature, or the connection of causes, through the attribute of Thought alone. And insofar as they are considered as modes of Extension, the order of the whole of nature must be explained through the attribute of Extension alone.

In other words, there cannot be a “connection of causes” between a and b because they are modes of different attributes. This is what we would expect from 1P10, and in its application to modes, 2P6. Because $\text{idea}(a)$ and $\text{idea}(b)$ are ideas of modes of different attributes, those ideas must also not be causally connected. The reason is because a cannot be conceived through b as a cause and vice versa. There is no connection between a and b to represent in the infinite intellect.

(1)-(5) in this argument, then, appear to be a restatement of Spinoza's proof that my mind does not involve ideas of anything but my body. It cannot involve ideas of modes of other attributes because those modes cannot enter into a causal relationship with my body. Therefore, they cannot be represented by my mind.

However, (6) represents an addition to Spinoza's argument in Letter 64 that rules out a scenario that is not ruled out by the positive proof in that Letter. The positive proof in Letter 64 excludes the possibility that I can conceive (modes of) other attributes via Thought and Extension. However, in Letter 65, Tschirnhaus seems to have also been worrying why it is that we don't *perceive* the other attributes. Why is it that my mind cannot, in the first place, include ideas of modes of other attributes? Spinoza merely rules out this possibility by citing 2P13, which states that the human mind just is the idea of a body.

The issue with this initial response lies in Spinoza's proof of 2P13. Spinoza writes, Next, if the object of the Mind were something else also, in addition to the Body, then since (by IP36) nothing exists from which there does not follow some effect, there would necessarily (by P12) be an idea in our Mind of some effect of it. But (by A5) there is no idea of it. Therefore, the object of our Mind is the existing Body and nothing else, q.e.d.⁸⁸

2P13 rules out the possibility that I could have ideas of modes of some other attribute by appealing to 2A5, an axiom. 2A5 states: "We neither feel nor perceive any singular things except bodies and modes of thinking." Spinoza's initial response to Tschirnhaus, then, relies on an axiom that simply states that we do not perceive these other attributes. And in Letter

⁸⁸ All underlining is mine.

65, Tschirnhaus casts doubt on this axiom by appealing to the fact that my body is “one and the same” as a mode of other attributes.

Again, I don’t think that Tschirnhaus believes himself to perceive other attributes and that’s why he’s doubting 2A5. Spinoza also seems to believe that it is just obvious that we don’t perceive other attributes. However, (6) appears to be further reason for rejecting the possibility that we perceive modes of other attributes. In fact, (6) rules out the possibility that I perceive a mode that is “one and the same” as my body because, an idea that is of both my body, a singular thing, and a mode parallel to my body, also a singular thing, would not be a “mind” in the first place.

At 1P11, Spinoza argues that the human mind is the idea of an existing singular thing, without specifying that that thing is a body. The core idea behind the demonstration is that all of the modes of thinking that we are aware of (2A3) are posterior to an idea of a single thing. That is, my ideas of the particular modes of thinking (love, desire, hate, etc.) are all dependent on an idea of some singular thing. This idea can exist without any of particular modes of thinking I’m aware of—it exists whether I love or hate or desire—but these modes of thinking cannot exist without the idea—in 2A3, Spinoza argues that this idea can exist “even though there is no other mode of thinking.” So, for Spinoza it is the nature of the human mind to be the idea of a singular thing.

Given that we are perceive the effects on a body (2A4)—something that Tschirnhaus does not deny—it must be that this singular thing, of which our mind is an idea, is a body (2P13). A body is a *singular* thing, according to Spinoza’s definition (2D7), because it is the effect of a number of smaller bodies that exist in a complex causal relationship with one

another. Some of the details of this complexity are described in the physical discursus following 2P13.

So, Spinoza's response in Letter 66 is two-fold: it explains again that we cannot perceive modes of other attributes because they cannot enter into causal relations with our body *and* it explains that our mind can be the idea of *only* our body because the human mind is the idea of a singular thing and *not* of multiple things, and in particular, not of modes of different attributes.

3.1.2. The Master Argument, Stated

We can now restate Spinoza's proof that other attributes are uncognizable to humans as it is stated across Letters 64 and 66. I will replace instances of "know" with "cognize" to emphasize that the argument shows our inability to have *any* idea of the other attributes.

- (1) The power (ability) of each thing is defined solely by its essence. (3P7)
- (2) Humans have ideas. (2A2)
- (3) Humans have ideas of a particular body. (2A4)
- (4) Humans do not perceive any other singular thing. (2A5)
- (5) The human mind is the idea of a singular thing. (1P11)
- (6) The body is a singular thing. (2D7)
- (7) The essence of the human mind is that it is the idea of a particular body. (2P13)
- (8) Therefore, the mind's ability to cognize extends to (a) what this idea involves or (b) what can be inferred from (a).
- (9) The object of the mind, i.e., the body has God as a cause only insofar as God is extended (2P6).
- (10) The idea of the *body*, therefore, cognizes God only insofar as God is extended (1A6).

- (11) The mind itself has God as a cause only insofar as God is thinking (2P6).
- (12) The idea of the *mind*, therefore, cognizes God only insofar as God is thinking (1A6).
- (13) Therefore, the mind cognizes God as an extended and thinking thing only.
- (14) No attribute from God can be inferred from another attribute or its modes. (1P10)
- (15) Therefore, the human mind cannot cognize attributes other than Thought and Extension.

This Master Argument allows us to flesh out the **Cognizability Condition** because it provides a rubric by which we can tell whether or not some *x* is cognizable by humans.

Cognizability Condition: Everything is conceived through Thought or Extension, but not both.

We cannot therefore cognize particular attributes “other than” Thought and Extension.

3.1.3. Extending this Argument to SI, SI_s, AN_s, and AN_o

We can extend this argument to show that the Subjectivist’s “real essence” and Objectivist’s “attribute-neutral” entities are uncognizable in particular. To do that, we need only to add the following additional premise:

- (14b.) We must cognize everything under an attribute. (1P10s)

As the argument above suggests, Spinoza denies that we can conceive “other attributes” via the attributes we do conceive. However, Spinoza reveals in the scholium to 1P10, we are also unable to conceive anything except under an attribute. He writes, “Indeed, nothing in nature

is clearer than that each being must be conceived under some attribute...” (II/52/10). With (14b.) included in our argument, we can reach a further conclusion:

(16b.) Therefore, the human mind cannot cognize anything except under the attributes of Thought and Extension.

This conclusion is inconsistent with the cognizability of the entities described by **SI**_i and the version of **AN**_s.

Take **SI**_i’s “real essence”. This essence is not identical to any attribute, since the attributes are mere illusions of the mind. And, of course, it is not a mode of either of those attributes. Therefore, it cannot be cognized under any attribute. Because we must cognize everything under an attribute, we cannot cognize God’s “real essence.”

Now take an example of an attribute-neutral substratum, e.g., a mode. This mode’s intrinsic properties do not include any attribute-specific properties. In itself, it is not cognizable under any attribute. Therefore, we cannot cognize it as it is in itself. Therefore, we cannot cognize *its* instantiating attribute-specific properties. What we do cognize are modes *of* Thought and *of* Extension. We cannot cognize modes *simpliciter*, according to Spinoza.

It is more difficult to extend this argument to **AN**_o, because it is neither clear *what* the nature of an attribute-neutral property or relations is on this view, nor is it clear what it means to consider something “neutrally.”

The central idea of the Overlap Strategy is that parallel modes of different attributes have identical neutral properties. The Overlap strategy seems to face a dilemma about what a

“neutral property” is. There are two ways of understanding the identity or commonness of neutral properties. Consider a neutral property that two modes, one of Thought (t) and one of Extension (e) have in common, call it *F*. *F* either falls under an attribute or it doesn’t. If it does not fall under an attribute, then, according to **14b.**, we cannot conceive it. On this option, *F* is uncognizable for the same reason that the “real essence” and substrata are.

Let’s assume then that *F* falls under an attribute. In this case, *F* is no longer an attribute-neutral property because we are now in an attribute context. *F* must, for example, follow either from Thought or Extension. But if it follows from, e.g., Thought, then it cannot be conceived through Extension and vice versa. This possibility is ruled out by 1P10. That is, the entire point of the Overlap View is to maintain the difference between properties that fall under attributes while maintaining their identity in some attribute-neutral context. If *F* falls under an attribute, then that identity cannot be maintained.

One final move is to insist that *F* falls under *both*, thus jettisoning the Overlap View’s distinction of attribute-neutral and attribute-specific properties.⁸⁹ Identically the “same” *F* falls under both Thought and Extension and its sameness imbues the modes of the different attributes with numerical identity. However, we cannot conceive the *identity* of some mode or property under Thought and simultaneously under Extension. There is no “connection” between these entities (1P10, 2P7). Those modes and properties must be conceived through their respective attributes.

⁸⁹ Della Rocca’s (1996, 134-5) discussion of attribute-neutral properties invites this confusion, partially because Spinoza does not typically describe things in terms of “properties.” A “property” must be a mode, since it is conceived through its bearer. But if it is a mode, then it must be a mode of an attribute. However, nothing can be a mode of two attributes because attributes have nothing in common.

Here, it will likely be objected that we *do* conceive “neutral” properties, just always under particular attributes. That is, though we cannot cognize, for example, “being a cause” except under Thought (“being a cause_t”) or Extension (“being a cause_e”), we are still conceiving attribute neural properties. We can *abstract*, one might say, the neutral properties from their particular instances under the different attributes.

It is correct that these arguments purport to show that the neutral properties cannot be cognized “concretely,” that is, in particular and not via an attribute. But this leads us to the next question: can the “neutral properties” be conceived in abstraction? Or can we only conceive particular attribute-specific properties? This question is addressed in Section 4.3.

3.2. Commitments to Uncognizables vs. Uncognizable Commitments

We now have our justification for labeling the Objective, Subjective, and Attribute-Neutral Interpretations “God’s Perspective Interpretations”: each is committed to something that humans cannot cognize. I now want to argue that these commitments themselves are uncognizable to humans: God’s Perspective Interpretations must hold that humans cannot cognize Spinoza’s theory given what it says about human cognition.

Let me clarify this claim. There are two ways of understanding the “commitments” of Spinoza’s theory of God’s attributes. On the one hand, the commitments are each instances of human language. That is, the “commitments” are strings of letters written on a page, vocalized sounds, ink on paper, black pixels on screens, and so on. Regarded in this way, the “commitments” are modes of extension: they take up space, have some quantity of motion and rest, have a definite duration, and so on. On this way of looking at it, these commitments *are* cognizable in the sense that a human can perceive them insofar as they have full use of

their various senses. When I say that the commitments themselves are uncognizable, I do not mean insofar as they are modes of extension perceived by the various human senses.

Instead, when I say that these commitments are uncognizable, I refer to the intended *meaning* of these various blots of ink and soundwaves. On a contemporary view, we might think of these modes of extension as having meaning insofar as they, for example, express propositions or refer to particular entities via definite description or a chain of causal links from an initial baptism to later instance of reference.⁹⁰ Perhaps tools like these are needed for Spinoza to express general commitments to collections of entities that are uncognizable in particular. However, whether or not these commitments are meaningful on *some* theory of meaning is not our interest here. We are interested in what Spinoza thinks about the meaning of the various modes of extension used to express his theory.

In this section, I will argue that Spinoza believes that human language has meaning insofar as it causes ideas. Spinoza thinks of the function of language as consisting solely in the association of words and other bits of language with ideas in memory. Therefore, a bit of language has meaning, or at least its intended meaning, only insofar as it causes an intended idea. There are no abstract “propositions” that are expressed by language on Spinoza’s view.

Because this is Spinoza’s account of how language manages to “mean” something, the various commitments constituting Spinoza’s theory of the attributes only have meaning insofar as they cause us to have ideas of the entities involved in that theory. And, as I’ve argued in the previous section, the commitments that God’s Perspective Interpretations want

⁹⁰ This helps partly explain why Curley (1969, 121-6) wants the attribute of thought to be “propositional.” As we will see, Spinoza cannot make sense of commitments to other attributes, etc. except under this propositional model of thought, which allows for the assertion and affirmation of propositions about entities that cannot themselves be conceived,

to include in Spinoza's theory are uncognizable: we cannot *in principle* have ideas of those particular things. Therefore, the intended "commitments" of Spinoza's theory on these interpretations are themselves uncognizable.

The following discussion will also show why there is pressure for Spinoza to allow for the possibility of "general ideas"—that is, ideas of "attributes" and such that are ideas of collections of things where one cannot have the idea of each particular thing in those collections. In other words, Spinoza cannot commit to there being "other attributes" simply in virtue of asserting a general proposition like "There are other attributes." This general claim can have meaning for us only if it can cause ideas in us.

In other words, God's Perspective interpreters are guilty of not heeding his admonition to his readers in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*:

It is, of course, true that we can (when there are reasons which move us to do so) indicate to others, by words or other [means, something other than what we are aware of. But we shall never bring it about, either by words or by any other means, that we think differently about the things than we do think about them. That is impossible, as is clear to all, once they attend only to their intellect, apart from the use of words or other symbols. (I/83/19)

3.2.1. Spinoza on the Nature of Language

Spinoza never explicitly develops a theory of human language in the *Ethics* or elsewhere. However, his comments on the nature of words and their relationship to ideas makes it clear that he takes language to consist in the association of linguistic devices with ideas in memory and the causal exchange of those ideas via activations of those associations. In this section, I

will briefly explain and give textual evidence for the core theses of Spinoza's account of language.

3.2.1.1. Words are a product of the imagination, not the intellect.

One recurring theme throughout Spinoza's work is that language, and especially words, are products of the imagination rather than the intellect. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza writes,

...since words are part of the imagination, i.e., since we feign many concepts, in accordance with the random composition of words in the memory from some disposition of the body, it is not to be doubted that words, as much as the imagination, can be the cause of many and great errors, unless we are very wary of them." (TIE, 88).

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza asserts that "except for Christ no one has received God's revelations without the aid of the imagination, i.e., without the aid of words or images." (1, 25). It will be helpful, then, for Spinoza to distinguish language itself from what that language is used to express, as I did earlier with the notion of "commitment."

Spinoza does so himself later in the TTP, where he writes, "Scripture is sacred only insofar as by Scripture we mean the things signified in Scripture, not insofar as we mean by Scripture the words, or the language and utterances, by which things are signified." (X, 20)

For Spinoza, words themselves are nothing but a collection of "images," presumably meaning that they are nothing but symbols on pages, vocalized sounds, and so forth. They are not necessarily identical with the things that they mean.

3.2.1.2. Words are modes of extension, not ideas.

A corollary to the claim that words are the product of the imagination is Spinoza's claim that words are extended things. He writes that

...an idea (since it is a mode of thinking) consists neither in the image of anything, nor in words. For the essence of words and of images is constituted only by corporeal motions, which do not at all involve the concept of thought. (2P49s1)

Spinoza draws a distinction in 2P49 between ideas, images, and words. Only ideas are modes of Thought which do not involve Extension in any sense. Ideas are "concepts" of the mind, suggesting that they are the product of the intellect rather than the imagination. Words and images, however, involve Extension essentially. They consist in "corporeal motions" in the body and in other bodies: they are either themselves modes of Extension, like words on a page, or images caused by interactions with modes of Extension. For example, a seeing the word "apple" might cause me to have the image of an apple.

3.2.1.3. Words have meaning insofar as they are associated with ideas and images.

In the Second Part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza's gives us a brief insight into how he understands the signification of words. Here, Spinoza illustrates how memory works via association of ideas and images with the example of one's hearing the word *pomum* (apple). He writes,

And from this we clearly understand why the Mind, from the thought of one thing, immediately passes to the thought of another, which has no likeness to the first: as, for example, from the thought of the word *pomum* a Roman will immediately pass to the thought of the fruit, which has no similarity to that articulate sound and nothing in

common with it except that the Body of the same man has often been affected by these two, i.e., that the man often heard the word *pomum* while he saw the fruit (2P18s, II/107/14).

The primary function of words is to be associated with certain ideas and images in the mind. Here, Spinoza argues that certain strings of letters and/or sounds get associated with certain ideas and images. In the background here is a view about the nature of language education: children hear parents using the word “apple” whenever they hold a piece of a particular kind of fruit. The child thus associates the image of the word “apple”—likely just a sound until the child learns written language—with the image of the fruit itself. This simple model is intended to extend to all of human language, no matter how complex. The example here is of an image and some words associated with that image. However, Spinoza also thought that words can be associated with *ideas* as well. That is, “God” can come to be associated with the intellect’s idea of the infinite substance.

3.2.1.4. Meaning is “mind-relative”.

Laerke argues convincingly that this associationist account of language entails that meaning is “mind-relative” for Spinoza (533). Because Spinoza believes that words get their meaning by being associated with certain images and ideas in memory and in the intellect, the associations people have with certain words will be different. This suggests that there is no one single idea always associated with the word “apple” in a group of persons or within the experience of one person. It is inevitable that each person will form a different image or idea of an apple upon hearing that word and that any given person has several ideas associated with “apple”. It all depends on the contexts in which they’ve heard the word in the past and in which they continue to hear the word “apple” that associate the idea of that word with

other ideas in their memory. For this reason, Spinoza would encourage us to avoid talking about *the* idea or *the* image associated with a particular word.

This also suggests that pragmatics will play a crucial role in Spinoza's understanding of linguistic expression. Spinoza tells us explicitly that "Words have a definite meaning only from their use" (TTP, XII, II).⁹¹ Because there is not necessarily one idea associated with each particular word, one *correct* usage, one cannot rely on "the" semantics of certain words to get their meaning across. Context, including one's knowledge about the associations their interlocutor might have with certain words, what features of those ideas are relevant for discussion (the color of the apple vs its flavor), and so on will play a central role in causing the appropriate ideas in others' minds.

3.2.1.5. Language is a primary cause of philosophical error.

Because words are the product of the imagination, they are liable to leave us in confusion. The fundamental trouble with words is that we can produce innumerable combinations of them, just like we can produce innumerable combinations of colors and shape on a canvas. And, even though those words might each be associated with images and ideas, there's no guarantee that the images and ideas one intends to cause in oneself or another will match up with the ideas and images that are actually associated with certain words. This leads to a major source of philosophical error: cases wherein we mistakenly believe that certain words

⁹¹ Spinoza illustrates this point by discussing the sanctity of certain words: "If they should be so organized that, according to their usage, they move the people reading them to devotion, then those words will be sacred. So will a book written with the words organized that way. But if, afterward, the usage should be lost, so that the words have no meaning, or if the book should be completely neglected, whether from malice or because men no longer need it, then neither the words nor the book will be of any use. They will lose their holiness. Finally, if the same words should be organized in another way, or a usage should prevail according to which they are to be taken in an opposite meaning, then the words and the book which were previously sacred will be unclean and profane." (TTP, XII, II.)

are associated with an intended class of ideas, but in fact that class of ideas is absent in the human intellect. There are possible instances of “empty words.”

One of Spinoza’s favorite examples of this phenomenon is the example of the words “the will,” which, he thinks, previous philosophers have intended to use to refer to a distinct faculty of the mind responsible for, for example, affirming an idea. Spinoza writes,

...men are deceived in that they think themselves free, an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. This, then, is their idea of freedom—that they do not know any cause of their actions. They say, of course, that human actions depend on the will, but these are only words for which they have no idea. For all are ignorant of what the will is, and how it [20] moves the Body; those who boast of something else, who feign seats and dwelling places of the soul, usually provoke either ridicule or disgust.

(2P35s)

Here we have an example of where previous philosophers intend to talk about the “will” as a free faculty of the mind. However, Spinoza argues that we can have no idea of such a faculty, because there is no “will” distinct from the intellect (1P31, 1P33). In this case, the words “the will” are associated with ideas of one’s actions coupled with a lack of ideas about their causes. They cannot be, however, associated with the idea of a faculty distinct from the intellect.

We see a similar discussion of the disconnect between words and ideas in Spinoza’s discussion of Prophets in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. He writes,

Since the Prophets perceived God’s revelations with the aid of the imagination, there is no doubt that they were able to perceive many things beyond the limits of the

intellect. For we can compose many more ideas from words and images than we can by using only the principles and notions on which our whole natural knowledge is constructed. (1, 45)

What distinguishes us non-Prophets from the Prophets is that *we* have to use the principles and notions in the intellect to come to knowledge of God. Prophets, however, could somehow perceive God with the aid of the imagination. And the Prophets thereby “perceived and taught almost everything in metaphors and enigmatic sayings, and expressed all spiritual things corporeally. For all these things agree more with the nature of the imagination” (1, 46). However, Spinoza is clear that we cannot rely on the imagination for knowledge of God (2P44). This suggests that the words that the Prophets use, though intended to describe God, are associated in *us* with images of God and not of ideas. To confuse the two would be disastrous for our knowledge of God.

Considerations like these lead to Spinoza’s diagnosis of the cause of most errors in philosophy and in general. He writes,

And indeed, most errors consist only in our not rightly applying names to things. For when someone says that the lines which are drawn from the center of a circle to its circumference are unequal, he surely understands (then at least) by a circle something different from what Mathematicians understand. Similarly, when men err in calculating, they have certain numbers in their mind and different ones on the paper. So if you consider what they have in Mind, they really do not err, though they seem to err because we think they have in their mind the numbers which are on the paper. If this were not so, we would not believe that they were erring, just as I did not believe that he was erring whom I recently heard cry out that his courtyard had flown into his

neighbor's hen because what he had in mind seemed sufficiently clear to me [viz. that his hen had flown into his neighbor's courtyard.

And most controversies have arisen from this, that men do not rightly explain their own mind, or interpret the mind of the other man badly. For really, when they contradict one another most vehemently, they either have the same thoughts, or they are thinking of different things, so that what they think are errors and absurdities in the other are not (2P47s, II/128/24).

Again, this is why pragmatics must play a central role in Spinoza's theory of meaning. Words are associated with any number of ideas and images in the minds of different people. Errors arise when people are unclear about (1) the ideas and images that words are *actually associated with* in their minds, that is, the ideas that they actually have in mind upon encountering certain words and (2) the ideas and images that words are associated with in other people's minds. The only way to sort this out, presumably, is careful attention to one's own mind, and the behavior of other persons.

3.2.2. Commitments to Particular Uncognizables are Meaningless

I will assume that Spinoza took this views on language to apply to his own theory of the attributes. That is, he took each of the words constituting the various propositions, demonstrations, and scholia that describe that theory to be associated or able to be associated with an intended class of ideas. If **SI**, **SI**, **OA**, **AN**, **AN** are cognizable commitments, then they ought to be able to be associated with ideas of particular things that words like "real essence," "the attributes are identical," "other attributes," "attribute-neutral" are intended to be associated with. However, Spinoza's Master Argument shows that no human can have these ideas. Therefore, these words cannot be associated with any of their intended ideas.

That is not to say that they are not associated with any ideas or images *tout court*. As Spinoza's account of language suggests, words can be associated with any number of different images and ideas depending on the context and the person encountering those words. For example, the words "other attributes" might be associated with pixels, chalk marks, vocal utterances, and so on. They might be associated with diagrams in a classroom intended to illustrate Spinoza's ontology or with formulas like " $\forall x \neq T \vee E$ ". Each reader will have to determine that for themselves. However, they cannot be associated with the ideas of attributes other than Thought and Extension, because we cannot conceive attributes other than Thought and Extension. For that reason, **SI**, **SI**, **OA**, **AN_s**, and **AN_o** are uncognizable commitments: we cannot have the ideas they are intended to be associated with. To return to Spinoza's admonition at the beginning of this section: these commitments require us to think about things in a way that is impossible for us, and reflection on *what* these words are associated with *in our intellects* will reveal that they are not cognizable as intended.

4. The Demand for the Generality of Thought

In the previous two sections, I've argued that (1) God's Perspective Interpretations commit Spinoza to particular uncognizable things and (2) that these commitments are themselves therefore uncognizable. However, I've ignore another way of understanding **OI**, **SI**, **AN_o** and **AN_s**. It could be that God's Perspective Interpreters think of these commitments as general commitments to a collection of uncognizable entities rather than as commitments to particular uncognizable entities. "Though we cannot conceive particular attributes other than Thought and Extension," and Objectivist might say, "we can conceive that there exist things meeting that description."

In this section, I will argue that Spinoza's theory of cognition and abstraction rule out this possibility. For Spinoza, all thought consists in ideas of particular things: we cannot have ideas of, e.g., "other attributes" *in general* or *as a collective*. Thus, God's Perspective Interpretations cannot avoid the central objection under discussion.

4.1. Indirect Routes to Ideas of Uncognizable Entities

A defender of a God's Perspective Interpretation might object that we can cognize purportedly uncognizable things as a collective even though we cannot cognize them in particular. The most natural "indirect route" that Spinoza might turn to is the route of forming general, abstract ideas. The basic strategy is simple: one can abstract from particular ideas to form a general idea (what we would now call a "concept") that one can leverage to represent entities that one cannot have particular ideas of. For example, in order to represent attributes other than Thought and Extension, one might form a general, abstract idea of "an attribute" and then form the idea corresponding to the description "some attribute not identical to Thought and Extension." The ideas here would be general in the sense that they are not ideas of any particular instance, e.g., the idea of "an attribute" is not identical to the idea of Thought or Extension, but is abstracted by representing what the objects of those two ideas have "in common." This basic strategy, it seems to me, is common to a number of superficially different responses one might have to the challenges to direct representation of the uncognizable entities that I've just offered. Here are some examples.

4.1.1. Divine Deferral

Confronted with our own cognitive limitations, one might make defense of the cognizability of rival interpretations' commitments.

We cannot interpret the metaphysical commitments of the *Ethics* as restricted to what we human beings can cognize. After all, we are limited creatures with finite intellects. There is a limit to what we can understand about God's essence, the constitution of the natural world, and so on. The *Ethics* is constructed, as it were, from God's point of view. *God* can cognize [insert humanly uncognizable item here] because *God's* intellect is not confined to a finite number of ideas of things which follow from Thought and Extension. Spinoza can commit himself to the existence of these humanly uncognizable things because we can understand that they are cognizable by the infinite intellect.

If this route is to be successful, it must avoid the reliance on our having particular ideas of entities that are uncognizable to us, but are cognized by the infinite intellect. That is, when one describes the "other attributes", for example, as "those attributes conceived by God that are neither Thought or Extension," one cannot claim to have formed an idea of the particular attribute matching that description. This is the essence of divine deferral: one has to leverage their particular ideas of the infinite intellect insofar as it is understood by us and the humanly cognizable attributes to form a kind of general idea of "what's in the infinite intellect." For example, the idea here might match the description "an attribute that God conceives and is not identical with Thought or Extension" with the proviso that we cannot form an idea of the *x*.

4.1.2. Implicit Definition and Analogy

Another attempt to cognize other attributes indirectly is the use of implicit definition to try to get a grip on the relevant directly uncognizable entity. One might argue,

The “other attributes” are like Thought and Extension in the following ways: they have modes parallel to the modes of the known attributes; they are infinite in their own kind; they cannot be conceived through one another; they are what God conceives of as constituting his essence; there are ideas of their modes in the infinite intellect; if we could conceive them, our ideas of them would be adequate. If you want an idea of the other attributes, just make a list of everything that is true of the known attributes and then your idea of the “other attributes” is just an idea of something of which all those things are true and which is not identical to Thought or Extension.

The idea here is to spell out everything that the uncognizable item has in common with similar cognizable items in order to establish the tightest possible analogy between the two. If one has a full grasp on the ways that, for example, the known attributes function in Spinoza’s theoretical framework and a grasp on the non-identity of the putative attributes with the known ones, one might argue that has generated a kind of implicit definition of the “other attributes”. On this strategy, the transcendental items are like unobservable entities on some philosophical interpretations of scientific theorizing: they are understood not by being directly “observed” but by understanding that the role they play in Spinoza’s metaphysics. One might even argue on this strategy that we are in a better position with the other attributes than we are with other unobservables, because it is at least the case that we “observe” two of their class, namely, the known attributes.

But this fails. Like in the case of divine deferral, this strategy basically asks us to form an idea of some x not identical to but playing the same theoretical role as some cognizable items. That’s why I consider it an instance of the same general strategy as the

divine deferral strategy. In order for this strategy to be successful, it would need to show that the idea of e.g., “what the two attributes have in common” is *not* an idea of an attribute-neutral entity.

4.1.3. Critical Self-Reflection and the Via Negativa

A supporter of Wolfson’s Subjective Interpretation who is friendly to Maimonides might make the following speech about God’s “real essence”:

If we reflect on our own cognition, we recognize that it has certain limitations. We cognize God has having two attributes because the objects of our experience are most generally categorized as following from either Thought or Extension. However, since God’s essence is infinite, our conception of it is irredeemably flawed. At best, the most we can say is that God’s real essence is not identical to Thought or Extension, taken individually, and is in some sense identical to them, taken collectively. All we can be sure of is our own illusions, thus our idea of God’s essence must be wholly negative.

This speech is perhaps unfair to Wolfson, because it has one glaring problem. The suggestion is that the real essence can only be known negatively, that is, in terms of what it is not. Nevertheless, it would seem reasonable to say that at least we can know that the “real essence” is itself an *essence*, that it is infinite, and so on suggesting that it has at least something in common with the illusory subjective attributes. However, I present the speech in this way merely to throw a general strategy into sharp relief.

Again, we can see the same basic strategy in play here, except that it has a negative, self-critical cast. Our idea of the “real essence” on this view is wholly negative: one can imagine taking the implicit definition from the previous subsection and strategically placing

negations throughout. Whatever the specifics, the basic move here is the same as in the other two examples. Our idea of the “real essence” must amount to the idea of “some x that is *not* Thought or Extension and is *not* conceived by the finite intellect and is *not*...” where we have ideas of Thought, the finite intellect, and logical relations like negation, conceived in attribute-specific ways. The question is whether we can have the relevant general idea of “some x ” that meets this wholly negative description.

Of course, this strategy may rely on decidedly un-Spinozistic interpretation of what “negative” claims amount to. Spinoza does not seem to think of negation as a truth-functional device, as we might. For example, in the TIE, Spinoza writes,

[...] the names given to things that are only in the intellect, and not in the imagination, are often negative (for example, infinite, incorporeal, etc.), and also from the fact that they express negatively many things that are really affirmative, and conversely (for example, uncreated, independent, infinite, immortal). Because the contraries of these are much more easily imagined, they occurred first to the earliest men, and they used positive names. We affirm and deny many things because the nature of words— not the nature of things—allows us to affirm them. And in our ignorance of this, we easily take something false to be true. (TIE, 89)

In other words, those employing the “via negativa” strategy will need to assure themselves that they are not merely affirming a *positive* commitment to “other attributes.”

4.1.4. The “Infinity” of God’s Attributes

Finally, one might argue that we can get a grip on the existence of other attributes because we understand God to have “infinite” attributes. For example, one might number the attributes that we can cognize (2) and then claim that “God has more than 2 attributes, and in

fact more than we could ever count.” This strategy is similar to the one discussed in 4.1.2: the idea is that we can form a general idea of “attribute” and then say how many entities satisfy that general idea. Or, one may argue that we can cognize that God has other attributes because we can cognize God as an *infinite* being. An infinite being, one might argue, cannot have finitely many attributes, so the God’s Perspective Interpretation is correct.

Of course, this indirect route rests on an interpretation of Spinoza’s usage of “infinite” that I dispute elsewhere.⁹² Spinoza is clear that the infinite should be treated as something that it is inappropriate to count and that God ought not to be conceived as “divided” into an innumerable collection of attributes. So, it’s not clear how an idea of God’s infinity will help us cognize the existence of other attributes. To cognize God as infinite is to cognize God as being unlimited or as lacking no attributes.

In any case, this strategy’s success seems to rest on our ability to form a general idea of God’s attributes or essence so that we can form a general idea of the count of those attributes or the “infinity” of that essence.

4.2. The Requirement for Generality of Thought

The four examples of indirect routes of cognition all employ the same basic philosophical move. They all claim that one can form some general idea of “some [uncognizable] *x*” that is related to an abstract from what we can cognize.

Some interpreters (Curley 1969, 153) have pointed out that there is at least one text pertaining to the “other attributes” wherein Spinoza, at least *prima facie*, explains his

⁹² See Section 4 of my “Spinoza’s Theory of God’s Attributes: a Textual Analysis”

epistemic relationship to the “other attributes” in terms congenial to this strategy. In text we discussed in Chapter 1 from the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza writes,

After the preceding consideration of Nature, we have so far been able to find in it only two attributes which belong to this all-perfect being. And these attributes give us nothing to satisfy us that they are the only ones which constitute this perfect being — on the contrary, we find in ourselves something which openly proclaims to us the existence, not merely of a great many, but of infinitely many perfect attributes, which must belong to this perfect being before it can be said to be perfect. [...] This something...can only come from the infinite attributes themselves, which tell us *that* they are, but not *what* they are.⁹³

Here, a God’s Perspective Interpreter will read Spinoza as saying that we know *that* there exists some x that has all of the features of an attribute but is not identical to Thought or Extension. (We might formalize this claim as: $\exists x(Ax \wedge x \neq t \wedge x \neq e)$, where A corresponds to a general idea of “being an attribute”, and t and e name Thought and Extension.) Other interpretations might claim that we know *that* God has a distinct real essence or *that* there are attribute-neutral properties. Though we know enough about these entities to know that they exist and that they count as “attributes” or “essences” or “extensional properties”, we don’t know *what* these entities are: we cannot know the uncognizable features that distinguish them from one another and from those entities we cognize.

The central question the God’s Perspective Interpretation is whether Spinoza allows for the formation of general ideas: ideas that are formed from some kind of reflection on the

⁹³ From Spinoza’s note 3 on Part I Chapter 1. One might also cite Letter 56, where Spinoza discusses his ignorance of “other attributes.” In Section 4.2 of Chapter 1, I argue that neither text suffices to show that Spinoza was committed to other attributes.

commonalities between their cognizable instances that can be conjoined with other ideas (say of existence and logical relations like negation) to represent their *uncognizable* instances as a collection of entities falling under some description. These general ideas must in addition be characterized only in attribute-specific terms: any “general idea” cannot be an idea of something that underlies or overlaps the attributes and their modes. I will now argue that all available textual evidence suggests that Spinoza rejected the existence of these general ideas. According to Spinoza, all thought consists of ideas of *particular* things. Descriptions purporting to cause us to have general ideas in fact only cause us to have particular ideas. In addition, these particular ideas are of no help in indirectly cognizing the uncognizable.

4.3. Spinoza on Abstraction

In this section, I will briefly describe two accounts of “abstraction” that are present in Spinoza. The first is an account of “abstraction” on which the word denotes an essentially confused imaginative process. I will call this the process of forming “common images.” Spinoza discusses this account of “abstraction” only to dismiss it as inherently flawed: forming an imaginative model of what a class of things has in common does not suffice to give one knowledge about what those things have in common. The second is an account of “abstraction” on which the word denotes the process of reasoning itself, that is, the intellectual process of forming clear and distinct ideas of that in which a collection of things “agrees.” It is clear that the God’s Perspective Interpretation requires “general ideas” to refer to the “common notions” formed by this second kind of abstraction and not the confused ideas produced by the first kind. I will ultimately argue that we cannot form the common notions we would need to cognize **OA**, **SI**, **AN_o** and **AN_s**.

4.3.1. Common Images: Abstraction through Confusion

In most cases, Spinoza uses the word “abstraction” to denote a confused, imaginative process. I will briefly describe that process (insofar as it can be gleaned from Spinoza’s text) and then I will explain why it is confused.

Imagine attempting to form the general idea of “human being” by imagining what different human beings have in common. This process involves both ignoring what distinguishes human beings and focusing on what they have in common. To abstract this way, one might try to mentally focus on the shared features of a number of different human beings. One person might notice that the humans they imagine all walk upright, have a relatively large brain, two kidneys, and so forth. Another might notice that all the humans they survey have hair on top of their heads but no fur, have roughly the same skin tone, have four limbs, and so forth. Depending on which humans one surveys, they will form a different idea of what a “human” is in general. In each case, however, the idea formed will be different because we will inevitably survey different classes of humans when trying to imagine “what they have in common” (2P40s).

What will these ideas be like? One can only answer for oneself. However, Spinoza suggests that these ideas will inevitably be more confused than the ideas of the instances from which they are formed. What would it be to imagine a being that has just the features common to all human beings? How tall would it be? What shape would it be? What skin color or gender would it have? Spinoza seems to think that a general idea of “human” imagined in this way will either have to arbitrary features that answer these questions or will somehow lack these features, if such a thing is imaginable in the first place.

In any case, these “general ideas” will ultimately be images, or what I’ll call “common images.” Common images are the product of the imaginations attempts to abstract an image of something that resembles every input of that abstraction. The images are common in that they resemble each of their “instances”—and I mean “resemble” in a strictly sensory way.

Spinoza worries in various places across his work that this kind of “abstraction” is both confused simultaneously taken to have philosophical value. Platonists, Spinoza seems to think are most guilty of taking this route of abstraction. For example, Spinoza warns us in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics* that some philosophers create “models” of beings in this way and then go on to suggest that these “models” are prior in Nature to actual natural things. Spinoza seems to have in mind (his understanding) of Plato’s forms. The worry is that philosophers claim to have “universal notions” of the forms of things because they can form confused images of what a class of things has in common.

According to Spinoza, this confused process is usually obscured by the way that his rivals use technical language. According to Spinoza notions that are sometimes called “universal,” “transcendental,” or “Second” and are intended to be “general” in the sense that they are meant to be ideas of multiple objects of a common class. Spinoza gives the example of putative ideas corresponding to “transcendental” words like “Being, Thing, and something” and words signifying “universal notions” like “Man, Horse, Dog” and so on. In the *TIE*, Spinoza calls these warns us of thinking in terms of these confused “abstractions.” (19, 21, 75, 76, 93)

If these words signify common images, and Spinoza thinks that they must, they must signify highly confused images. We’ve seen earlier that the idea of “Man” must be highly

confused. But imagine what the idea of “Being” would have to be. What does literally everything that exists have in common? How can we be sure that, in attempting to imagine this commonality, that we have considered *everything*? Spinoza regards this as obviously impossible: the imagination can only form a small and finite number of images at once (2P40s).

If **OA**, **SI**, **AN_o**, and **AN_s** signify common images, then they are of no use in helping us cognize the uncognizable. First, they are the result of an imaginative process. However, Spinoza denies that the imagination can form an idea of, for example, an attribute. Second, they will inevitably be particular images that vary from person to person. This suggest that they cannot be appropriately called “general.” And finally, because common images are supposed achieve “generality” in virtue of resembling a collection of other images, they are of no use to the God’s Perspective Interpretation. For example, since Spinoza is clear that attributes cannot be conceived through one another, it’s not clear how a single image could “resemble” two attributes.

I do not see a reason to believe that Spinoza took this to be the only model of what someone might call “abstraction.” Spinoza does not claim to be able to read the minds of those that he disagrees with. Instead, it appears that the “common image story” is intended to be a diagnosis of what is going on in the cases where we claim to form “universal notions” or “abstract ideas.” Here, I think Spinoza’s challenge to the reader is to show how they manage to achieve the generality of thought with the imagination: that is with the use of images and words. Because the imagination is finite and inherently flawed, according to Spinoza, it does not have much epistemic value, especially when it comes to trying to form judgments about Nature.

This is not to say that Spinoza denies the impossibility of “general thought.” In fact, he takes a certain kind of “general” thought to be the basis of all reasoning and key to forming the kinds of knowledge that he is after in the *Ethics*. Spinoza claims that we can form “common notions” with the intellect that are actually *more* clear and distinct than the ideas from which they are formed. The God’s Perspective Interpretation, then, must show that the “general ideas” they take Spinoza to be able to produce are common notions and not some confused kind of abstraction. I will now argue that they cannot do that.

4.3.2. Common Notions: Abstraction via the Intellect

In this section, I want to clarify the idea of a “common notion” both by briefly characterizing it and by contrasting it with the idea of a “common image.” I should note right at the start that what precisely a “common notion” is the subject of a great deal of discussion among Spinoza’s interpreters.⁹⁴ However, what I say here does not rest on any controversial specifics about what “common notions” are and how they work. I am only interested in two properties of common notions: (1) they are formed from conceiving what some class of entities has “in common” and (2) they are more adequate than the ideas from which they are formed.

It will be helpful to begin with an example of a common notion before jumping into a characterization of common notions. At 2P37, Spinoza introduces talk of “common notions”

⁹⁴ See e.g., Wilson (1996, 114), Curley (1973, 357), Pollock (1880, 150-1), Savan (1958, 217), Melamed (2000, 9-11), Melamed (2009, 75), Matson (1990, 87), Bennett (1984, Section 11.3), Schliesser (2014), Schliesser (2017), Schliesser and James (2011), Schoen (1977), Peterman (2014)

What I say here is friendly to Huebner’s (2015, 8-11) discussion of the “generality” of common notions. On my view, the generality of common notions is equivalent to their being identically present in the complex idea of their “instances.” This is consistent with Spinoza’s belief that “all thought is particular” because the common notions are particular ideas. In Spinoza, thought cannot be “general” in the sense that one can have an “idea of” some collection of things without (1) ideas of some of the instances of that collection and (2) by using some of those instances as prototypes resembling other ideas in that class.

and refers the reader to L2 in the physical discursus of Part II as an example of a “common notion.” At L2, Spinoza writes,

L2: All bodies agree in certain things.

Dem.: For all bodies agree in that they involve the concept of one and the same attribute (by D1), and in that they can move now more slowly, now more quickly, and absolutely, that now they move, now they are at rest.

Here, Spinoza suggests that what bodies have “in common” is (1) that they belong to the same attribute, namely Extension, and (2) that they all are in a state of motion or rest. At 2P38, Spinoza goes on to clarify that this is true not only of composite bodies (e.g., human bodies) but also of their parts. Common notions, in other words, are of features that are “equally in the part and in the whole.” This latter fact is of course entailed by the generality of common notions like L2.

This is why Spinoza tells us that common notions are not ideas of the essences of “singular things” (2P44c2d), but are instead of a collection of things. For example, there is no “common notion” of a particular body. Common notions are that with respect to which a collection of things agrees. In the example above, the common notion of motion-and-rest is equally in a body and all of its parts and is that in virtue of which that body and other bodies (including its own parts) “agree” (2P38). For another example, 2P40s2 cites the common property of proportionals that Spinoza cites from Euclid. Spinoza seems to think that the axioms and theorems of geometry would also be examples of notions common to all extended things. Our ideas of attributes, of course, will also be common notions and indeed the *most* common because all bodies are extended things and all minds are thinking things.

It is key to note that the common notions are apparently not formed by merely imagining what a class of things has in common. Instead, they seem to correspond to commonalities between different things that can be used in the process of reasoning about those things. Spinoza's law-like, axiomatic expression of common notions (e.g., in the *Physical Discursus* of Part II) suggests that common notions allow us to make inferences about a class of things.

This is likely why Spinoza insists that common notions, unlike common imagines, are *more* adequate than the ideas from which they are derived (e.g., 2P38). For example, my idea of "something common to all bodies," like the attribute of Extension, will be more adequate than my idea of any given singular body. This is why forming common notions amounts to "reason" and the "second kind of knowledge" for Spinoza. If we were not able to form adequate ideas of what singular things have in common, we would not be able to "distinguish the true from the false" (2P42s).

The key features of common notions are that (1) they are ideas of what the *intellect* conceives as the common features or "agreements" among of a class of things, (2) they are ideas that allow us to reason and form knowledge about those things, and (3) they are more adequate than the ideas from which they are formed. Because Spinoza believes that the intellect "is the same in all men" (2P18s), he also believes that two people can have the same common notion, or at least a common notion that is distinct only in virtue of being present in a distinct mind and because of some distinction among the ideas themselves. That is why (4) common notions are general not only in virtue of representing agreements, but also in virtue of being identically present in different intellects.

4.3.3. Common Notions or Common Images?

The key question, then, is whether the general ideas corresponding to **OA**, **SI**, **AN_o** and **AN_s** correspond to common notions or common images. If they correspond to common images, then our purported indirect representations of uncognizable entities are not representations of those entities at all. They are merely confused images of bodily states associated with certain words in memory. So, if the general ideas are to be any help in our cognition of the “indirectly cognizable” entities, they ought to be common notions.

Strictly speaking, one can only answer this question for oneself. Spinoza does not claim to be able to read minds. However, I will argue that though we cannot be certain exactly what is someone’s mind when they consider **OA**, **SI**, **AN_o** or **AN_s**, we can prove in each case that it cannot be a common notion.

As was noted before, Spinoza is explicitly clear that transcendental notions, expressed with words like “some,” “being,” and “thing” correspond to confused common images. So, it is already clear that the expressions I’ve been using to characterize the general ideas in **OA**, **SI**, **AN_o** and **AN_s** —all of which rely on the use of quantification—must correspond in part to common images and not notions. However, I will allow that there are perhaps other ways of expressing the general ideas that need not rely on transcendental terms or the device of quantification. Perhaps, for example, one can express her commitment to the “other attributes” by using terms for numbers, e.g. “There are more than two attributes.”

Having said that, certain notions must be employed to express the relevant ideas involved in commitments to the uncognizable. Those notions, for example of “attribute” and “essence” are formed from ideas that we can have like of Thought and Extension. So, I will focus on examples of words of these types.

There are presumably as many purported common notions as there are purported routes to the indirect cognition of uncognizable essences, attributes, and neutral properties. I'm going to focus on three for the sake of brevity: the putative notions of **attribute**, **essence**, and **duration**, with the last one serving as an obvious example of an attribute-neutral property. In each case, I will argue that there cannot be common notions corresponding to these terms. They must either correspond to common images or ideas of cognizable entities. These examples can be used as a model for how Spinoza would handle other "general ideas."

4.3.4. Common Notions of "Attribute" or "Essence"

If **SI**, **SI_i**, and **OA** are cognizable via general ideas, then it must be that we can form common notions of their otherwise uncognizable entities. That is, we would need a common notion of "essence" in the case of **SI** and a common notion of "attribute" in the case of **OA**.

It is clear that, insofar as we have an adequate idea of God, we have ideas of Thought and Extension, the two known attributes. The question is whether there is a common notion of "attribute" or "essence" that is not just the idea of Thought or the idea of Extension. If there is a common notion, there ought to be some "agreement" between Thought and Extension of which we can form a simple idea. However, it appears that there can be no such agreement since, as Spinoza is clear throughout Part I of the *Ethics*, the attributes "have nothing in common with one another" (1D3, 1P2, 1P10). In other words, there is not some property—being an attribute—that Thought and Extension of which we can have a common notion.

Furthermore, the purported common notion of an "attribute" or "essence" would, because it is common to both attributes, have to be *more adequate* than the ideas of the individual attributes. Given that these attributes are the essence of God and are that through

which we have an adequate idea of God, it's not clear that we can achieve ideas that are more adequate than our ideas of the attributes (2P46, 2P47).

By extension, words like “other attributes” or “the real essence of God” or “all of the non-Thought, non-Extension attributes conceived by the infinite intellect” and so on must inevitably correspond to some idea or image that is not a common notion. In some cases, it could be a confused common image, or it could be just the image of the words themselves, or it could be of something cognizable like Thought or Extension. What these words are associated with depends on the person and the context.

These considerations suggest that we cannot cognize **OA** or **SI**, even if they are understood to refer indirectly to some class of uncognizable things.

4.3.5. Common Notions of “Attribute-Neutral” Entities

Similar considerations apply to the purported general ideas of attribute-neutral entities.

Consider first the entities described by AN_o. Because there are perhaps infinitely many such entities, I will focus on one example: duration. In order to form a general idea of duration, one would have to have an idea of some “agreement” between the duration of bodies and the duration of minds. On the surface, this may seem plausible since the duration of these items might be represented with the same imaginative aids: number, time, and so on (Letter 12).

However, Spinoza is clear that because the attributes have nothing in common with one another, nothing that follows from one of them has anything in common with anything that follows from the other attribute (1P10, 2P6). There is therefore no “agreement” between them that can serve as the object of a common notion.

This suggests that attribute-neutral language, including words like “mode,” “substance,” “cause,” “duration,” and so on, either corresponds to ideas of entities under the

known attributes or to a confused common image produced by trying to ignore the distinctions between those ideas. However, there can be no common notions that cross attributes. Therefore, no such “general idea” can be used to indirectly cognize attribute-neutral entities.

Terms that appear to signify attribute-neutral entities must therefore refer to attribute-specific entities. For example, “duration” must refer to the duration of a thought or the duration of a body specifically and not some property that both thoughts and bodies have in common. Perhaps a more accurate, though inelegant, expression would be “duration_T” or “duration_B.”

In the case of the “substrata” of ANs, the situation is even worse. The problem is that because we cannot consider anything except as falling under an attribute (1P10s), it’s not clear that we can form the idea of particular substrata, stripped of their attributes, and then form a notion of what they have in common. What is “common” to these substrata is their attribute-specific properties. Of course, we might claim to deny attribute-specific properties of these substrata, but given that we must conceive everything under an attribute, it’s not clear that such an idea could exist in the first place. Merely saying “a mode with its attribute-specific features removed” does not suffice to cause one to have an idea of an attribute-neutral substratum.

4.3.6. Is Spinoza’s Theory Meaningless?

In Sections 3 and 4, I have argued that we cannot cognize the commitments of the God’s Eye Interpretations, according to Spinoza’s theory of cognition. In other words, we cannot form ideas of what the words “other attributes,” a “real essence,” or “attribute-neutral entities” are intended to refer to either in particular or in general. If this is correct, then Spinoza’s theory

of cognition requires that his theory of God's attributes be at least partially meaningless. This suggests that God's Perspective Interpreters must believe that either Spinoza didn't really believe one or both of these theories, that he took his theory of cognition to be inapplicable to his own philosophical system, which in turns suggests that he was not a systematic philosopher, or that Spinoza held foundational ideas about God and human thought that are simply inconsistent with one another. These conclusions ought to make us suspect whether the God's Perspective Interpretation is charitable to Spinoza.

5. Conclusion: The Cognizability and Meaningfulness of Spinoza's Theory

How did we get in this position? It seems to me to be the direct product of how God's Perspective Interpreters approach Spinoza's text. Because they end up ascribing humanly uncognizable commitments to Spinoza, it must be that they want to isolate Spinoza's theory of cognition from his metaphysics. Because his metaphysical theory describes the most fundamental parts of reality, they might argue, we ought to begin with an interpretation of it before worrying about how dependent beings like humans think about those parts of reality.

But if we ignore how Spinoza's system accounts for the nature of human thought and, by extension, how that system accounts for thought *about* philosophical issues, we open up the possibility that our interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics will ascribe to him views that his theory of cognition takes to be uncognizable. In other words, if we deny the general form of the **Cognizability Condition**, we open up the possibility that Spinoza's own system will violate that condition. It seems to me that the only way to avoid this pitfall is to start with Spinoza's theory of cognition, see what it says about how we understand his other theories, and then go about the work of interpreting those other theories with that characterization of human thought in mind.

If we take this route and assume that Spinoza was a systematic thinker who didn't hold inconsistent beliefs about his central doctrines, we adopt the Human Perspective Interpretation. In this chapter, I've tried to show that we can arrive at the Human Perspective Interpretation from a highly intuitive starting point: if we assume that Spinoza took himself and his readers to be able to make sense of his system, then we must assume that the **Cognizability Condition** holds in general.

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