Blessed Thorns: A Meditation On Spinoza's God

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Philosophy

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Dedicated To The Memory Of Edward Theisen & Alexander Balasak
Abstract

Despite having been published over three hundred years ago, Spinoza’s *Ethics* is a text that is still, even today, widely misunderstood. Two of the more common and persistent misunderstandings revolve around the accusations of some who have labeled his philosophy both atheistic and materialistic. These two misunderstandings date back to the first time the *Ethics* was published, immediately following Spinoza’s death. In an attempt to not only address these accusations, but as well to clear up any misunderstandings surrounding them, this thesis will be split into four chapters that are divided into two main parts. The first half will deal with the question of whether or not Spinoza is an atheist. The second half will deal with the question of whether or not Spinoza is a materialist. In so doing this thesis will establish and defend the position that it is a misreading to characterize Spinoza’s philosophy as atheistic and materialistic.
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Introduction

"Spinoza was no logician"

- Jonathan Bennett
Introduction

Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) is a difficult philosopher. He spent over a decade writing his masterpiece, the *Ethics*, a text that is split into five Parts that deals with topics as diverse as metaphysics, ethics, ontology, and physics. It can take a lifetime trying to work one’s way through his complex set of ideas, and the language used to express them in the text. The language used is so old that when read today, it almost seems like a new language. Whether he is discussing the intellectual love of God, or why it is that the mind cannot be split from the body, Spinoza’s philosophy has the potential to give the reader vertigo. Even with this difficulty, when reading Spinoza it is impossible not to be aware of the profundity on each and every page. Whether one agrees or not with his ideas, it is impossible not to recognize their importance. The *Ethics* demonstrates a master philosopher at the top of his game, in way that was never to be repeated or expanded upon due to his untimely death at the age of forty-four. Spinoza lived as he died, quietly. But there is nothing quiet about his philosophy. Despite using the language of the scholastics and writing the *Ethics* using the geometric method of Euclid, (a method that employs propositions, definitions and axioms, among other things, as means of organizing his thought), Spinoza went out of his way to slowly and methodically show the reader why he is, without question, one of the most important philosophical iconoclasts the world has ever known.

In the *Ethics* Spinoza dismantles everything from the belief in an anthropomorphic and personal God, to showing why it is that affectivity is the real foundation of an ethical existence, and not some invisible transcendent realm that is
unchanging. There is so much taking place in the *Ethics* that it is impossible to cover every angle, aspect, or idea contained therein.

During his lifetime Spinoza only published two books, one on the philosophy of Descartes, entitled *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy and Metaphysical Thoughts*, which still ranks as one of the best books written by one philosopher about another. The *Theological-Political Treatise* is the second, which deals with the relationship between religion, the state and politics. This book was so controversial that when it was published, Spinoza never put his name on it and used a false publisher’s name to protect the publisher’s identity. Spinoza lived in a time when people where routinely killed for the things that they believed, some of whom, were his close friends. Spinoza was of course aware of this, and the message hit home when the *Theological-Political Treatise* was banned shortly after it was published, and although in letters he talks about publishing the *Ethics* during his lifetime, it would not be published until after his death. As with the TTP, the *Ethics* was banned shortly after it was published. Largely read as a heretical text, Spinoza, while alive, and after he died, was almost universally chastised, as being an atheist and the *Ethics* was seen, even before its publication, as spreading indecent ideas that were dangerous to read.

Although his philosophy did enjoy a latent success that has recently been well documented by the intellectual historian Jonathan Israel in his masterful text *The Radical Enlightenment*, it was not until the Romantic poets and philosophers of the late Enlightenment and early modern period that Spinoza’s philosophy was really discussed publicly. Following this, Spinoza’s philosophy has engendered more intellectual curiosity, largely starting with Stuart Hampshire’s text, *Spinoza* published
in 1951, which introduced his thought to a whole new generation of philosophers and philosophy students. There have now been several excellent studies done on his work, many of which will be discussed here. Perhaps the strangest thing among many strange things surrounding the reception of Spinoza’s philosophy is how all of this has lead to the lack of Spinozistic philosophers. For example, unlike Descartes, Hegel, Kant, or Plato, Spinoza cannot be seen as having spawned a large group of followers. In fact, his philosophy is more likely to be reacted against then agreed with. This is due in large part to the poor reception and poorer understanding of his philosophy throughout its long history.¹

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* In an attempt to understand Spinoza’s philosophy with more precision, this thesis shall contain itself by dealing with two common questions that surround his philosophy. They are:

1) Is Spinoza an atheist?

AND

2) Is Spinoza a materialist?

To deal with these two questions, this thesis will be composed of four chapters that are split into two parts. The first two chapters will deal with the question of his atheism. In order to do this, the first chapter will begin by establishing what it means to label his thought atheistic, by developing a concept of atheism that can be applied

¹ In his essay entitled *The Sentiment of Rationality*, the philosopher and psychologist William James offers another reason as to why Spinoza has not been well received when it comes to having spawned followers. According to James “the fate of Spinoza, with his barren union of all things in one substance, on the one hand; that of Hume, with his equally barren “looseness and separateness” of everything, on the other – neither philosopher owing any strict and systematic disciples today, each being to posterity a warning as well as a stimulus – show us that the only possible philosophy must be a compromise between an abstract monotony and a concrete heterogeneity.”
to the *Ethics*. This will be followed by a discussion on the definitions and axioms of the first Part of the *Ethics* entitled *Of God*. It is here that Spinoza deals with the necessary terms and facts needed to begin understanding his idiosyncratic notion of God. The second chapter will deal with the first fifteen propositions of Part I, where Spinoza, in an immensely compact and dense few pages, outlines the basic metaphysical structure needed to understand the contours and complexities of his God.

The final two chapters will deal with the question of Spinoza’s alleged *materialism*. Chapter three will deal with the question of what it means to label his philosophy materialistic. In order to come to a better understanding of what this means, a concept of *matter* will be developed so it can be applied to the *Ethics*. Following this will be a discussion of his concept of *corporeality* and the *mind/body relationship*, which are the two areas most commonly identified as the proof of Spinoza’s materialism. Chapter four will be split into two separate but mutually related parts. The first part will be a discussion of his concept of the *attributes*, which perhaps more then any other aspect of his philosophy, has been misunderstood, leading to a confused reading of the content of the *Ethics*. The second half of the final chapter will deal with two important and influential readings by Stuart Hampshire and Edwin Curley, who attempt, in their own ways to demonstrate how Spinoza should be read as a materialist.

Although Spinoza’s masterpiece is entitled the *Ethics*, discussing the specifics of Spinoza’s ethical theories is of secondary importance to this thesis. The argument here seeks to clarify the metaphysical commitments, which make Spinoza’s ethics
possible. Although there is a tremendous amount of philosophical meat in the *Ethics*, these two questions are immensely significant. If these parts of Spinoza’s philosophy are ignored or misunderstood, it is next to impossible to properly understand how and why he was able to make some of the ethical claims that he does. These two questions get to the heart of Spinoza’s philosophy in a way that others do not.
"The drama, he thinks, is going on inside the cage. The cage, he thinks, is the world. Standing there alone and helpless, the door locked, he finds that the lions do not understand his language. Not one lion has ever heard of Spinoza. Spinoza? Why they can't even get their teeth into him. "Give us meat!" they roar ..."

- Henry Miller

"Spinoza is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme. As a natural consequence, he was considered, during his lifetime and for a century after his death, a man of appalling wickedness. He was born a Jew, but the Jews excommunicated him. Christians abhorred him equally; although his whole philosophy is dominated by the idea of God, the orthodox accused him of atheism. Leibniz, who owed much to him, conceded his debt, and carefully abstained from saying a word in his praise; he even went so far as to lie about the extent of his personal acquaintance with the heretic Jew."

- Bertrand Russell
Chapter One

Once while being interviewed Albert Einstein was asked whether or not he believed in God. In answer to the question he stated, “I believe in Spinoza’s God, who reveals himself in the harmony of all being.” Even though Einstein’s answer taken on its own proves nothing, it does present a suitable place to start discussing whether or not Spinoza’s God, as outlined in the Ethics, is a God at all. Or, is Spinoza, as some have contended, a Godless heretic who attempted to undermine the authority of revealed religion through his atheistic philosophy? For example, Pierre Bayle, in his Dictionary entry on Spinoza writes: “[he] was a Jew by birth, and afterwards a deserter from Judaism, and lastly an atheist.” A “powerful bishop”, who was a contemporary of Spinoza’s, states not only that Spinoza is an atheist, but also that he is an “insane and evil man, who deserves to be covered with chains and whipped with a rod.” As Matthew Stewart points out, to the general population in Amsterdam at the time, Spinoza was simply known as “the atheist Jew.” Moreover, it has been argued this same Jewish community in Amsterdam, which Spinoza came of age in and was later excommunicated from, was so outraged by his atheism they tried to have him assassinated. Bayle, commenting on the incident writes that Spinoza was

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1 “By 1750 innumerable authors, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian, Iberian, Swiss, and English, as well as Dutch, had indignantly denounced Spinoza as the most pernicious and dangerous thinker of the era. Typically, Buddeus styled him, in 1717, the ‘chief atheist of our age’. But by that time Spinoza had been universally decried as the prince of atheists, Christendom’s chief foe, the ‘new Mahomet’ for almost half a century.” Jonathan Israel. Radical Enlightenment, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 161
4 Ibid, 11
5 Ibid, 11
“treacherously attacked by a Jew who struck him with a knife when he was leaving the theater. The wound was minor but he believed that the assassin’s intention was to kill him.”

Why is the question of Spinoza’s atheism of such importance? Does it really matter, beyond a few interesting historical anecdotes, whether or not Spinoza and, by extension, his philosophy, are in fact atheistic? Put another way: is Spinoza’s apparent atheism philosophically relevant? Steven Smith argues for its relevance when he states, “the idea that philosophical problems can be treated as a class apart from a writer’s theological commitments can be true only of the narrowest conception of philosophy.” This statement stands in stark contrast with Jonathan Bennett’s view that “in discovering philosophical truth, it would make no difference if [Spinoza] saw himself as an atheist.” At this point it is necessary to briefly discuss what happens to Spinoza if he is read, on the one hand, as an atheist and, on the other hand, as a theist.

Stuart Hampshire, writes in the introduction to his text on Spinoza that, “there have been many Spinozas over the years since his death: a Parmenidean Spinoza, a Cartesian Spinoza, a materialist-atheist-determinist Spinoza, a mythical pantheist Spinoza.” The Spinoza with which we are interested here is the one conceived as a materialistic atheist, who thinks that all actions are in some capacity determined. Such a mechanistic reading is possible because, with God out of the way, the religiously sensitive topics of materialism and determinism are provided ample

6 Bayle, 292
foundation to flourish. That is, with God no longer a concern, it becomes possible to read Spinoza as a materialist, who understood the world through coldly mechanistic terms. What happens if this atheistic Spinoza is rejected and he is read as a theist, would this necessitate reading Spinoza as a philosopher drunk\textsuperscript{10} on mystical pantheism as some have suggested?\textsuperscript{11} Or, is it possible that Spinoza is a philosopher who accepted both God and materialism without being a materialist, and both God and determinism without being a moral fatalist? Is it possible to synthesize a materialistic and deterministic philosophy with a belief in God?

Despite what has been stated above regarding Spinoza’s apparent atheism, it is still necessary to further demonstrate the relevance of this question. Doing so will require a two-sided approach. On the one hand, it will be necessary to demonstrate how answering this question affects Spinoza’s system. That is, how do the questions of God and atheism weave their way through the metaphysical, epistemological and ontological aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy? Chapter one will therefore begin with the concept of atheism, followed by a discussion on the first Part of the \textit{Ethics} entitled \textit{Of God}. In so doing, it will be necessary to highlight the third definition of Part I: \textit{substance}. An investigation into the other key definitions with which Spinoza begins the \textit{Ethics} will then follow. Although there are eight definitions in Part I, it will only be necessary to deal with the first six. Particular attention will be paid to Spinoza’s

\textsuperscript{10} Novalis called Spinoza “the God-intoxicated man.”

\textsuperscript{11} Richard Mason writing on reading Spinoza as a mystical pantheist stated: “Any philosopher who tells us that all individuals in different degrees are animate, that ‘we feel and experience that we are eternal’ or that an intuitive intellectual love of God arises from an eternal form of knowledge has to be open to mystical readings, justifiably or not. But any mysticism is held in a firm grip. It is not mystical vision but logical proofs that are said to be the eyes of the mind. The love of God is to hold chief place in the mind; but it is clear and distinct understanding, not mystical illumination, which is to be the route to that love.” Richard Mason. \textit{The God of Spinoza: A Philosophical Study}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 3
definition of God, because within his definition of God are the beginnings of his understanding of expression and immanence. As will be demonstrated below, these two concepts play a central role in understanding Spinoza’s God. On the other hand, the practical implications stemming from the charge of atheism will begin to be demonstrated. The practical implications are of particular relevance given that, if ones conduct and attitudes towards life and their personal wellbeing are not affected by the rejection of God, then there would be little reason to discuss Spinoza’s apparent atheism. That is, if atheism does not have an empirical and lived impact, then why discuss it? It is worth discussing because, as Smith points out, the Ethics can be read “as a work of practical philosophy.”12 Or as Genevieve Lloyd phrases it, “the Ethics is a work which has the capacity to bring together the sophisticated insights of scholarly philosophy and the untutored wisdom of ordinary life.”13

Atheism

According to Steven Nadler the term atheism is undeniably “ambiguous”14 and was used during Spinoza’s lifetime as “an all-purpose charge”15 against anyone who “showed disrespect for religion.”16 This still begs the question, what does it mean to be an atheist? If by atheism one means a person or doctrine that denies the tenets of revealed religion as they are found in Judeo-Christian theology, Spinoza could certainly be labeled an atheist.17 After all, as Nadler points out, “Spinoza did not, to

12 Smith, xiii
15 Ibid, 112
16 Ibid, 113
17 “Spinoza as a young man had crossed all the frontiers of respectability and had broken down all the barriers; seen from a Christian and Jewish point of view, he was an outright atheist, and his most
be sure, have a very high opinion of most organized religions.\textsuperscript{18} Although Spinoza's conception of God will be examined more closely below, it is helpful at this point to show in brief where he diverges from the orthodox Judeo-Christian conception of God.

Spinoza does not conceive of God as a transcendent being who is somehow separate or distinct from the world in which he created. Unlike orthodox views on God, which state God is in the world but not of the world, Spinoza's God is both in and of this world.\textsuperscript{19} Nor does Spinoza accept the usual picture of God as a deity that stands in final judgment of our actions here on earth, as a means of deciding who will reside within the gates of heaven and who will rot in the fires of hell.\textsuperscript{20} In fact, there is no room within Spinoza's philosophy for the concepts of heaven and hell or, for that matter, a God who stands in judgment of the earthly activities of humans. Extending from this, Spinoza goes so far as to reject the concept of sin as it pertains to human action, seeing only confusion in understanding actions as sinful.\textsuperscript{21}

Furthermore, Spinoza does not accept God as a personal deity, who can be communicated with on an intimate level through such ritualized activities as prayer.

\begin{itemize}
\item serious works were simply unprintable ... He was determined to find a basis for morality ... which was independent of any institutional religion. This was the driving purpose of his metaphysical arguments.” Hampshire, xviii
\item Nadler, 113
\item “He was certain that any metaphysics which accepted the Jewish and Christian conception of God as the transcendent creator was certain to fail. Failure would show itself in the impossibility of reaffirming without contradictions the conclusions of the new natural sciences, which were incompatible with the claims of a theology that admits transcendence.” Hampshire, xix
\item “I do not bring in the notion of God as judge, and so my evaluation of works turns on the quality of the works, not on the potency of the doer, and the reward that follows from the action does so by the same necessity as it follows from the nature of a triangle that its three angles have to be equal to two right angles.” – Letter 21
\item “I not only assert that sin is not anything positive; I maintain that it is only by speaking improperly or in merely human fashion that we say that we sin against God, as in the expression that men make God angry.” – Letter 19
\end{itemize}
and confession. And finally, Spinoza does not accept the anthropomorphic conception of God as something retaining and exhibiting human-like qualities such as anger and wrath. As Bennett points out, “if asked ‘Are we helped to understand the nature of God by being told that God is, in some broad but not empty sense, a person?’ … theologians would answer Yes and Spinoza would answer No.” Put bluntly, for Spinoza “God has no emotions.” Taken on their own, these rejections by Spinoza of certain fundamental properties of the conception of God are ample evidence of his atheism. Such an opinion, however, rests on the unstable foundation of believing these two religious doctrines have the final say on what God is and how he is to be understood. As Rudolf Otto remarks, “we have to be on our guard against an error which would lead to a wrong and one-sided interpretation of religion” and by extension, God. Nonetheless, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, Spinoza most certainly can be understood as an atheist. Bennett puts it best when he states, “he agreed with the atheist that reality cannot be divided into a portion which is God and one which is not.”

What has been discussed above may upon first glance appear to be an ironclad endorsement of why Spinoza has been labeled an atheist. Although convincing, such a rash conclusion would only be taking into account half of the necessary information. Charles Jarrett, in discussing Spinoza’s apparent atheism, is quick to point out that although his God diverges in many key respects from the orthodox

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22 Bennett, 33
25 Bennett, 32
conception, in many other respects the orthodox and Spinozistic conceptions of God are in complete agreement. Both accept, for example, God as “omniscient, omnipotent, ... infinite, perfect, and unique.”26 This leads Jarrett to state that, “if he is an atheist ... he is surely a very unusual specimen of one.”27

Spinoza was personally and deeply affected by these charges of atheism. In writing the *Theological – Political Treatise*, a text that deals with the relationship between religion, the state and politics, he stated one of the main reasons for which he wrote it was to fend off charges of atheism.28 Also, when a critic of Spinoza’s claimed what he taught was “sheer atheism;”29 Spinoza responded by stating that his critic had “perversely misinterpreted my meaning.”30 In a letter where he addresses the charge of atheism directly, Spinoza asks, “does that man ... renounce all religion, who declares that God must be acknowledged as the highest good, and that he must be loved as such in a free spirit? And that in this alone does our supreme happiness and our highest freedom consist?”31 His position is asserted even further still, when he states that “I have clearly stated that the good worship God, and by their constancy in worship they become more perfect, and that they love God.”32 With this, it can now be better understood why Smith was wrong to declare that Spinoza’s philosophy “is a formula for the atheism that [Spinoza] either could not or would not admit to.”33

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26 Jarrett, 40
27 Ibid, 40
28 “The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation, too, as far as I can.” – Letter 30
29 Nadler, 112
30 Letter 43
31 Letter 43
32 Letter 21
33 Smith, 42
Where does all of this discussion leave the question of Spinoza’s atheism? If atheism is taken to be a concept that diverts from or disagrees with revealed religion, then Spinoza is without question an atheist. If atheism is taken in a different respect, as a concept that not only disagrees with any religious belief system, but also rejects the power and creative force of God, then the question of Spinoza’s atheism is far less clear. Put another way, from an orthodox Judeo-Christian perspective, Spinoza is most certainly an atheist. From a perspective that conceives atheism as not only the rejection of religion understood in its broadest context, but also the rejection of a supreme being called God, answering the question of whether or not Spinoza is an atheist becomes more difficult.

Part I: Of God

The Definition of Substance

In the second scholia to proposition 8 in Part I, Spinoza outlined four criteria a definition had to meet in order for it to be considered a definition. Taking a moment to reflect on what role the definition played for Spinoza is of great importance for two reasons. As Nadler states, the first reason definitions play an important role is “They lay down the basic elements of his ontology, or theory of what is” (Nadler, 44). In fact Nadler goes so far as to refer to them as the “bedrock” of Spinoza’s philosophy (Nadler, 44). The second reason definitions play an important role is they “serve a dynamic function. They provide the impulse that puts the machine into motion and they are part of the grease that allows it to keep going” (Nadler, 44). This second reason is of particular relevance given the potential of becoming bogged down by Spinoza’s geometric method, resulting in a rather static and slow reading of the *Ethics*.

The first criterion is “that the true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined.” That is, a definition of a given thing, must adhere to what the nature of that thing expresses as that thing to be considered a proper definition of that thing. For example, the definition of a square is: a geometric shape, which has four equal sides. If it is not within the nature of a square to have unequal sides then it cannot be defined as a geometric shape that has four unequal sides. In short, the nature of a thing is something of a guide for the definition. The second criterion is “that no definition involves or expresses any certain number of individuals.” That is, in order for a definition to be a definition of a given thing, it is not necessary for that definition to express a given quantity. And so, in defining what a square is, it makes no difference as to whether or not it refers to one square or twenty thousand squares, all squares must adhere to this definition for this definition to express the nature of what a square is. The third criterion is “that there must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists.” This of course is a self-evident criterion, which stems, not only, from the definition of substance, which will be dealt with in this section but also, from the third axiom in Part I, which stated “from a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily: and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.” In short, if a thing is not self-caused, then it necessarily must be caused by something else in order for
As will become evident from the outset, one of the main difficulties surrounding the commentary on Spinoza’s philosophy stems from his compact style of writing.\textsuperscript{35} This is evident from the very beginning of the \textit{Ethics} with his definition of substance: “by substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.”\textsuperscript{36} It is essential at this stage to take a moment and reflect on substance; after all, “to begin to understand Part 1 … one must grasp its concept of substance.”\textsuperscript{37}

the effect (the things existence) to come into fruition. The fourth criterion is “\textit{that this cause, on account of which a thing exists, either must be contained in the very nature and definition of the existing thing (viz. that it pertains to its nature to exist) or must be outside it.}” Although the bulk of what this fourth criteria is referring to will be discussed when the definition of substance is dealt with in this section, it can at this point be argued that a thing is by definition either the cause of itself or, it necessarily requires some external cause to bring it into existence.

The question now becomes, what kind of definitions does Spinoza intend for his to be in the \textit{Ethics}? According to Nadler, there are two types of definition: the first type is stipulative, which is “a kind of convention or setup about what something is to mean in a given context” (Nadler, 45). That is, a definition can be nominal in nature. Given the nominal nature of this type of definition “it makes no sense to ask whether the definition is true or false” (Nadler, 45). The second type of definition “may purport to describe the way something really is in itself” (Nadler, 45). That is, a definition of this type makes the claim: any definition of a thing has to express the nature of that thing as it is in itself. Although Nadler is right, that Spinoza wants to believe his definitions are of the second kind, it still remains to be seen whether or not his definitions are able to capture the nature of a thing as it is in itself.

\textsuperscript{35} “A natural metaphor to help with an understanding of Part I of the \textit{Ethics} is one of nuclear structure. In the rest of the work … Spinoza unraveled the consequences of his views on how the world is made up and how it operates. The opening sections tell us about the fundamental components in the nucleus of the system, and about the forces – some might want to say the \textit{logic} – that bound them together. A nuclear metaphor is apt because of a feature of his thought that one commentator has called his ‘conceptual minimalism’. We see an implosion or compression of terminology, where technical language seems to be crushed together in a way that can look in the end like a circular trick with mirrors. At times the effect can be claustrophobic in its concentration.” Mason, 25

\textsuperscript{36} (1p, d3) Spinoza is using a definition of \textit{substance} that is common to both Aristotle and Descartes. For example Descartes writes of \textit{substance} in his \textit{Principles of Philosophy} that “The only meaning we can give to ‘substance’ is that it is a thing which exists in such a way that it does not need anything else in order for it to exist. There is only one substance we can make sense of as existing independently of absolutely everything else, namely God. By contrast, we perceive that all other substances can exist only through the co-operation of God. Consequently, the term ‘substance’ cannot be applied to God and other things \textit{univocally} (in the usual scholastic terminology) — in other words, it is impossible to have a distinct understanding of any sense of the term, which is common both to God and to created beings.” With that said it must also be pointed out that Spinoza is the only one who remains consistent with and true to this definition.

\textsuperscript{37} Bennett, 55
In his text on the concept of substance in 17th century philosophy, R. S. Woolhouse points out that for Leibniz, this definition is too "obscure"; for one thing, the relationship between being 'in itself' and being conceived 'through itself' is not clear." Another reason Leibniz finds this to be an obscure definition is that it still remained uncertain whether or not a substance is a substance if conceived using one of the qualifications only (in itself) or does it need to adhere to both qualifications (in itself and through itself). If the answer to this question is that a substance only needs one of the qualifications then a substance pluralism is entered into. That is, a substance is understood in a common sense fashion or from the vantage point of naïve realism. As Leibniz points out, "men commonly' conceive of substances differently, as 'things which are in themselves though they are not conceived through themselves.'" In short, from a common sense perspective, all things are substances.

If the common sense perspective of a substance is examined using both qualifications, it becomes clear this is not what Spinoza had in mind. For example, under the common sense perspective, any thing is a substance. For Spinoza, a thing is a substance only if it is both conceivable in itself and through itself. To think a thing on its own is possible; it is not necessary to make reference to another concept in thinking it. But what does it mean to conceive something through itself?

Something conceivable through itself is the cause of itself, or, as stated in the

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39 The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives an excellent explanation of the common sense or naïvely realistic approach to things when he states: "The world of perception, or in other words the world which is revealed to us by our senses and in everyday life, seems at first sight to be the one we know best of all. For we need neither to measure nor to calculate in order to gain access to this world and it would seem that we can fathom it simply by opening our eyes and getting on with our lives. Yet this is a delusion." Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The World of Perception*, translated by Oliver Davis, (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp 39

40 Woolhouse, 32
definition of substance, *something that can be conceived through itself is the same as saying* “that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing.” As Spinoza states in the first definition of Part I, “by cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.” With this added information, it is now understandable why not just any thing can be a substance according to Spinoza’s definition. Although a thing can be thought or conceived in itself, it is not possible to think or conceive a thing through itself. A thing is not self-caused, and therefore requires the addition of further conceptualizations that allow for an understanding of the cause of the thing. That is, although a thing can be thought in itself, when the further qualification of through itself is added, it becomes clear that a thing is not self caused or that its essence necessitates its existence. A substance is a substance only if it can be conceived in itself and through itself as self-caused or necessarily existing. For Spinoza “the only thing that meets the strictest conditions for being a substance … is the whole of reality.”

Returning to Leibniz, it is now possible to address his two main concerns regarding Spinoza’s definition of substance. The first concern was with the lack of clarity the definition had when it came to the relationship between the qualifications of in itself and through itself. Only in addressing his second concern of whether or not a substance needs both qualifications does it become possible to properly address his first concern. As was demonstrated above, if the only qualification for a substance is that it needs to be conceivable in itself, then any thing, by definition, can be considered a substance. But, as Spinoza clearly states, a substance, in order to be

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41 Bennett, 15
considered a substance, needs to adhere to both qualifications. And so, the relationship between in itself and through itself, can now be properly understood as one of necessity. In order for a substance to be a substance, it must necessarily meet both qualifications. The question now becomes: if a thing is not a substance, then what is it?

**Key Definitions in Part I**

**The Second Definition**

In the second definition, Spinoza states that, “that thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature.” Although upon first reading this definition would appear to have more to do with the duration of a thing then with what a thing is such a hasty reading would be far too one-sided and incomplete. This is not to say that the discussion of what makes a thing finite is unimportant. On the contrary, coupled with what has been discussed above, this definition of what makes a thing finite begins to reveal a great deal about what makes a thing a thing. Spinoza adds further clarity when he states “for example, a body is called finite because we can always conceive another that is greater. Thus a thought is limited by another thought. But a body is not limited by a thought nor a thought by a body.”

First and foremost it is imperative that a thing never be referred to as a substance in the colloquial way. For example, when speaking about water and dirt, it is possible to say they are two different types of geological substances, which display different properties unique to their physical make-up. Although such a phrasing is not grammatically problematic, for Spinoza such a phrasing is philosophically flawed.

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42 “That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner.” (1p, d7)
given that it necessarily confuses the nature of a substance with the nature of a thing. Also, a thing is by its very nature a finite entity, which is ontologically relative insofar as it can always encounter some other thing that is bigger, faster, stronger, etc. Or, as he states in the seventh axiom of Part I, “if a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence.” Although this point will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three, it can be immediately understood from this definition that not only are things, limited by other things, but that they are also only limited by things of a similar variety or kind. That is, a body can only limit another body and a thought can only limit another thought. What this reveals about the nature of a thing is two-fold. On the one hand, a thing understood as a body is of a different kind then a thing understood as a thought. On the other hand, a thought and a body, although both can be understood as things, can never be confused as having a direct causal impact on one another. Extending from this, it becomes clear that a thought cannot cause a body and that a body cannot cause a thought.

The Fourth Definition

In the fourth definition, Spinoza addresses what he means when he uses the word attribute. “By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.” As will become clear when the problem of the attribute is discussed in chapter four, what Spinoza exactly means by this definition is one of the most controversial aspects of his entire philosophy. The attribute expresses for the intellect the very essence of substance. What then does Spinoza mean by the term
essence? After all, throughout Part I he uses the term rather “freely” and does not define what he means until Part II.

It would seem that for Spinoza an essence is defined as that which a thing must have in order for it to be that thing. Or, as Bennett states “the essence of x is that property which must be possessed by x and cannot be possessed by anything else – it is a qualitative necessary and sufficient condition for something’s being x.” It is also necessary to understand what an essence is and how it relates to both the intellect and a thing in a practical way. For example, what is the essence of a chair, a table or a human, and, does their essence have an affective impact on another essence? Put another way: does the problem of the attribute and its relation to essence have a lived impact? Although at this time there is not enough information to begin explaining and understanding the problem of the attribute in Spinoza’s philosophy, it is possible to investigate the relation of substance to its essence and how that relates to the attributes.

The essence of substance is causa sui. If a substance must be conceived both in and through itself, then it must necessarily exist, which is to say its essence is to exist. In short, the attribute expresses the essence of substance or the existence of substance (which are one and the same thing) for the intellect to perceive.

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43 Bennett, 61
44 “I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.” (2p, d2)
45 Ibid, 61
The Fifth Definition

In the fifth definition Spinoza explains what he means when he uses the word mode. “By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.” Although this is not made self-evident from the definition, Spinoza uses the word *mode* as a substitute for the word *thing*. A thing can no longer be understood as an individualistic object, but instead comes to be understood as a modification or affection of substance. Or, nothing can exist outside the causal power of substance, and because substance causes all modifications, all actions are an expression of substance. Bertrand Russell clarifies when he writes, “everything, according to Spinoza, is ruled by an absolute logical necessity. There is no such thing as free will in the mental sphere or chance in the physical world.”

Bennett, in discussing the mode, also points out that the Latin term “is *modus*, meaning a way that something can be or be done, or be the case.” That is, modes are “ordinary particular things”, or they are the “ways that reality is.” In short, modes are the metaphysical way of stating an ontological fact: *things exist*, and they exist only as affections or modifications of substance. As affections, the modes are wholly dependent on substance for their existence. After all, as Spinoza states in the first axiom “whatever is, is either in itself or in another.” Then as modes, they are “in another through which it is also conceived.”

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47 Bennett, 93
48 Ibid, 92
49 Ibid, 92
50 (Ip, d5)
The Sixth Definition

According to Spinoza: “by God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.” As should be immediately clear from the last half of this definition, the metaphysical concept of substance and the theological concept of God are synonymous with one another. That is, in using either the word substance or God Spinoza is making reference to one and the same thing. Given the collapsibility of these two terms, what has hitherto been stated regarding substance now holds equally for God. Despite the equivalence between these two concepts, Spinoza does offer further refinement regarding his understanding of God with the inclusion of absolutely infinite and eternal.

The further qualification of absolutely infinite is necessary given “if something is only infinite in its own kind, we can deny infinite attributes of it; but if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence.” The first thing that should be addressed is God is not of a particular variety or type; there is only God and not some collection of gods or different kinds of gods. As will become clear in chapter two, for Spinoza there can only be ‘one’ substance or God, as any more would be both incoherent and incomprehensible given his definitions of substance and God. This last statement

51 “It is a nuisance that English has pronouns which are always used for people and not freely used for anything else. We use ‘he’ for God, thinking of God as a person; if we came to think of God as impersonal, we should switch to ‘it’. No such choice faced Spinoza, because none of his half-dozen languages has personal pronouns. In Latin, for example, he had to use a masculine pronoun for God, to agree with the masculine noun Deus; but this masculinity is grammatical only, and implies nothing about the nature of the object. Whereas in English we must use ‘he’ in referring to a man and ‘it’ in referring to a pebble, in Latin a single pronoun serves for both, since homo and calculus are both masculine. As for ‘his’, ‘hers’, and ‘its’: there is a single Latin word for all of these, whatever the gender of the relevant noun. In translating Spinoza into English, then, it is inaccurate to use ‘he’ and ‘his’ where God is in question.” (Bennett, 34)
brings to the fore one potential misunderstanding regarding the numerical singularity of Spinoza’s God, and, although it will be addressed in more detail in chapter two, a few things need to be stated here. It is tempting to understand Spinoza as trying to explicate an endorsement for there only being in existence one God, at least numerically speaking. But, as Mason cautions, this reading can lead to a confusion, and runs counter to Spinoza’s over all point. According to Mason,

the aim has to be to show that there cannot be more than one substance because, as he says in a letter, he does not try to show that there is one substance, strictly speaking; and in this sense he is inaccurately described as a monist, if that is taken to mean that he counted only one existing substance: ‘it is certain that he who calls God one or single has no true idea of God, or is speaking of [God] very improperly.’

Moreover, if God were not absolutely infinite, it would mean not only that self-causation was not a part of God’s existence, but, also, that existence was not a part of God’s essence. It must also be mentioned that Spinoza’s singular God is rooted in metaphysical necessity unlike a Judeo-Christian conception of one God, which is rooted in a moral imperative against the worship of multiple gods. Karl Jaspers illustrates this when he states, “the substance that necessarily exists is infinite. If it were not, it would not exist through itself alone, but in relation to something other. Nor would it be total being, that is, all reality. Substance or God is therefore absolutely infinite.”

The further qualification of eternal is necessary, as Spinoza points out in the eighth definition, because: “by eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing.”

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52 Mason, 39
Commenting on this further qualification Bennett writes that, "by ‘eternal’ Spinoza means ‘absolutely necessary’."\(^{54}\) Seemingly contra to Spinoza, Bennett argues that in defining God as eternal, Spinoza has necessarily attributed to God a kind of duration. As has already been discussed, duration applies to things, which are finite in nature, and God is clearly not a finite thing for Spinoza. Despite this, Bennett argues that, "eternity, as I have implied, involves sempiternity; that is, it involves something’s being the case at all times."\(^{55}\) Although *prima facie*, this idea would appear to contradict Spinoza’s claim that “existence … as an eternal truth … cannot be explained by duration or time, even if duration is conceived to be without beginning or end.”\(^{56}\) Such a quick assessment of Bennett’s words would run roughshod over his point. Bennett further clarifies his point when he states that, “in talking about the time of existence of a sempiternal thing, we do not need tenses, clocks, calendars, or relatings of times to other times.”\(^{57}\) One could still object that “sempiternity could be “explained through duration,” for it is just unlimited duration, or duration through all times.”\(^{58}\) Such an objection would be a misunderstanding given “eternity cannot be so explained, as it involves not only sempiternity but also the additional concept of absolute necessity.”\(^{59}\) Therefore, according to Bennett, Spinoza commits himself “to attributing duration to God given that he attributes eternity to God, because eternity is necessary sempiternity, which is a special case of duration.”\(^{60}\)

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\(^{55}\) Ibid, 77
\(^{56}\) (1p, d8)
\(^{57}\) Bennett (1996), 77
\(^{58}\) Ibid, 77
\(^{59}\) Ibid, 77
\(^{60}\) Ibid, 77
inclusion of eternity into the definition of God, as far as Bennett is concerned, Spinoza has stated unequivocally that, because God’s existence is eternally necessary, he has attributed to God the ‘temporal’ qualification of sempiternity, which argues for the existence of something being the case necessarily for all time. Eternity should be understood then as a kind of duration, which is not reducible to any traditional means of measuring time, but, nonetheless, is a part of duration. With this it is evident that Spinoza’s definition of God is not simple repetition, but is adding further clarity to his understanding of substance as God.

It is also in his definition of God that for the first time Spinoza uses the word expression in conjunction with God. Although a seemingly minor inclusion, this word was the catalyst for Gilles Deleuze’s text Spinoza et la probleme de l’expression.Originally written as part of his doctoral dissertation, this text is without question one of the most interesting and insightful readings of Spinoza yet published. Given both the insight which can be gleamed from his reading and the tacit importance the concept of expression has for the whole of Spinoza’s thought, it is necessary to pause for a moment and take a closer look at how Deleuze understands Spinoza’s use of expression.

Expression

For Deleuze, expression is a concept that both extends itself through the whole of Spinoza’s system, and has an internal complexity on to itself. Thus, expression begins with substance. As Spinoza states in the first proposition, “a substance is prior in nature to its affections”, and as such, both substance’s essence and existence is

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61 When translated into English from the French, for whatever reason the title was translated as Expression in Philosophy: Spinoza. A more accurate translation would be Spinoza and the Problem of Expression.
expressed via the attributes, which are further expressed in and by the modes. The flip side to this is that expression contains within itself a two-tiered structure. Deleuze breaks down this two-tiered structure into the categories of to express and what is expressed. As Deleuze writes, “substance first expresses itself in its attributes, each attribute expressing an essence. But then attributes express themselves in their turn: they express themselves in their subordinate modes, each such mode expressing a modification of the attribute.”\(^{62}\) Such an understanding of expression and its role within Spinoza’s system will necessarily use a linear form of development to explain this idea, but it would be misguided to understand expression as a purely linear process. As should be immediately understandable, the line between what expresses and what is expressed is highly fluid given that what can express can also be expressed and what can be expressed can also express dependent upon which particular feature is being focused on at a given time. An attribute, for example, can at one time be expressed by any given mode, and, at another time, express the essence of substance. Deleuze puts it succinctly: “expression in general involves and implicates what it expresses, while also explicating and evolving it.”\(^{63}\) Such an entwined structure is what allows Deleuze to state, “God “complicates” everything, but all things explain and involve him.”\(^{64}\) Such an intimate entwining of expression and expressed between substance, its attributes, and modes, stabilizes itself because

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\(^{63}\) Ibid, 16

\(^{64}\) Ibid, 16 - Deleuze expanded on this: “Expression is on the one hand an explication, an unfolding of what expresses itself, the One manifesting itself in the Many (substance manifesting itself in its attributes, and these attributes manifesting themselves in their modes). Its multiple expression, on the other hand, involves Unity. The One remains involved in what expresses it, imprinted in what unfolds it, immanent in whatever manifests it: expression is in this respect an involvement.” Deleuze, 16
God is no longer understood as a *transcendent first cause*, but, rather, as an *immanent proximate cause* that is both of the world and within the world. As Spinoza states in proposition 18: “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.”\(^{65}\) In other words, God is what expresses all that is the case while also being expressed in and by all that is the case. As Mason points out, “God cannot be seen in any way as outside the ... world. What happens within the world happens within, not outside, God.”\(^{66}\) With this, Spinoza denies one of the fundamental properties traditionally ascribed to God: *the ability to be the transcendent first cause behind all that is created*. Or, as Spinoza writes in addressing the issue of people as created things, “men are not created, only generated, and their bodies existed before, although formed differently.”\(^{67}\) Spinoza also argues that, because people are not able to understand things through “their first causes ... so it happens that they fictitiously ascribe to substance the beginning which they see that natural things have; for those who do not know the true cause of things confuse everything.”\(^{68}\) These seemingly difficult ideas can be simply explained as follows: any object x, may have at one time been confined to a particular form and kind for a given duration, or, as Spinoza says, they are ‘formed differently’. But this same object, as understood from the

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65 It is worth noting that Bennett in translating this proposition does so by making it read, “God is the indwelling cause, not the crossing over cause, of all that is the case.” Such a translation seems misleading for two reasons. First, the use of the word ‘indwelling’ is far to Heideggerian in tone for Spinoza’s purposes. Second, the words ‘crossing over cause’ make little to no sense in relation to the point Spinoza appears to be trying to make regarding the immanent character of God.

66 Mason, 54

67 Letter 4 - This of course clashes with the Bible and the Book of Genesis, which unequivocally states, “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created; male and female he created them.”

68 (Ip, Sch.I)
vantage point of substance or God, has always existed as substance or God. That is, substance has always existed, and will always exist, and given that no thing can exist outside of substance, and since substance is not created, no object can in fact be created by substance. Instead, any object $x$ is simply a reconfiguration or further modification of substance, which is expressed, not created by substance and which has always existed in one way or another.

Immanence

In his text *Theory of Religion*, Georges Bataille offers a vivid explanation of how immanence functions. According to Bataille, animality and immanence are bound together on an intimate level. Expanding on this, he writes, "the immanence of the animal with respect to its milieu is given in a precise situation, the importance of which is fundamental." Bataille further amplifies his understanding of immanence and its relation to animality through the example of one animal feeding on another: "what is given when one animal eats another is always the fellow creature of the one that eats. It is in this sense that I speak of immanence." For Bataille, this binding together is possible because "there is no transcendence between the eater and the

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69 "In trying to understand Spinoza, one has to get used to, and feel at ease with, this notion of the double aspect, or the Janus-face, of things. Unlike Leibniz, he is suspicious of the idea of identity, and he thinks that whether we are facing an identity or a difference depends upon the angle from which we are viewing the objects in question." Hampshire, xxi

70 The same idea is expressed by physics through its law of conservation, which states, "A quantity of something, whatever it may be, never changes no matter what happens." Specifically addressing energy and matter the law states, "that the total amount of energy in the universe always has been and always will be the same. We can convert energy from one form to another (like mechanical energy to thermal energy via friction), but the total amount of energy in the universe does not change. Similarly, the law of conservation of matter says that the total amount of matter in the universe always has been and always will be the same. We can convert matter from one form to another (like ice to water or water to steam), but the total amount of matter in the universe does not change." Gary Zukav. *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), pp. 176


72 Ibid, 17
eaten.” Given the lack of transcendence, the focus is shifted down onto the earthly movements of actual things. In a word, for Bataille immanence is intimately bestial. Or, as Spinoza writes, “I frankly confess that I still do not understand in what respect spirits express God more than do other creatures.”

Reidar Due explains the concept in more rigorous language when he writes that, “immanence … is not to think from the point of view of a transcendent God.” Instead, God is to be understood as being “identical with and thus internal to or ‘immanent within’ reality.” Given this immanent structure, it is possible to discuss what Due labels “the ontology of mind.” What this tries to show is how “the mind is part of reality and unfolds as an activity within the force field of reality as a whole. There can be no subject situated outside of the natural system of causes.” That is, through an immanent approach to understanding how people think, one is able to explain how this happens using the causal laws of nature. There is nothing outside the causal laws to help explain how or why someone thinks and acts the way they do.

As will be discussed in chapter three, such an understanding of mind and its relation to the natural whole is directly in line with what Spinoza argues for, although, as will become clear, he also includes bodies.

In the last short essay that he wrote before dying, Deleuze states that “absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, to something; it does not depend on an

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73 Ibid, 17
74 Letter 54
75 Reidar Due. Deleuze, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 21
76 Ibid, 21
77 Ibid, 21
78 Ibid, 21
object or belong to a subject.

It is necessary to point out that Deleuze uses some of the same language in defining immanence that Spinoza does in defining substance or God. Deleuze defines immanence by using two qualifications. On the one hand, immanence is described as an in itself; and, on the other hand, immanence does not depend on any one modification for its existence. Given how Spinoza defines substance and God, he would only be able to except the last half of what Deleuze states: *that immanence is not dependent upon any one modification for its existence*. Immanence, then, extends itself throughout Spinoza’s system not relying on any one particular modification for its existence. Instead, it relies upon God for its existence. But there is no way in which immanence can be defined as something that is in itself. If something can be defined as in itself, it must also be defined through itself, which immanence is clearly not. It is for this reason that Deleuze is wrong when he states that, “in Spinoza, immanence is not immanence to substance; rather, substance and modes are in immanence.”

By defining immanence as he does, Deleuze misses that for Spinoza substance is immanent, but immanence is not substance. Or, just as immanence cannot be reduced to a particular modification, substance cannot be reduced to immanence. In the end Deleuze makes substance submissive to immanence by making substance’s existence depend on immanence by making substance exist “in” immanence, and, as Spinoza stated, “whatever is, is either in itself or in another.” For Spinoza then, there are two ways in which something can sustain its existence, either by being self-subsistent, which only substance or God is,

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80 Ibid, 26
81 (lp, al)
or through something else, which means any thing that is *not* God requires God for its existence. This holds equally for modifications of God and for immanence, which is part of God’s nature, but in no way defines or overrides God as such. It is this metaphysical structure that allows Spinoza to further state that, “what cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself.”

What this helps to further highlight is, for Spinoza, the fact that immanence cannot be conceived through itself and therefore relies upon God for its existence. The only way to explain things is through their immanent cause that naturally exists, which is substance or God.

It is perhaps this same understanding of immanence, which allows Deleuze to argue why Spinoza did not begin the *Ethics* with God. According to Deleuze, “Spinoza will always maintain that one cannot begin with God, with the idea of God, but that one must reach it *as quickly as possible.*” This statement is simply not true, and the textual evidence found in the *Ethics* does not support this claim. Also, one need only look at the title of the first Part of the *Ethics: Of God,* to realize that Spinoza is, if nothing else, priming the reader from the very beginning to have a discussion regarding God. And finally, the very first thing with which Spinoza starts the *Ethics* is a definition of self-causation: “by cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.” As is by now hopefully very clear, the only thing that fits this definition is the definition of substance or God. With the very first sentence of the *Ethics,* Spinoza presents the reader with the bare essentials needed for understanding his definition of God.

82 (lp, a2)
Returning to Bataille’s understanding of immanence, which is rooted in the bestial, it may seem awkward to place it side-by-side with Spinoza’s, which is rooted in substance or God, given that these two starting positions would appear to clash with one another. Any discomfort quickly subsides, however, when it is realized that by placing Bataille’s bestial immanence next to Spinoza’s philosophy, it becomes possible to stress the importance that the concept of naturalism had for Spinoza. As Hampshire writes, “Spinoza’s naturalism, the insistence that human beings are completely immersed in the natural order and are not to be understood outside it, is the most uncompromising naturalism that can be imagined.”

One of the necessary outcomes from such a dedicated naturalism is the displacement of the human being as some how above or superior to the rest of the natural world. Hampshire states it nicely, “Spinoza was … rejecting the Christian idea that human beings are altogether exceptional in nature and ‘like islands’ cut off from the rest of Nature by the possession of a supernatural soul.” Or, as Bennett explains it, “men differ only in degree and not in kind from all other parts of reality.” And so, years before Charles Darwin published On The Origin of Species, where he argues for the naturalized understanding of all animals, including humans, Spinoza not only knocks humans down from their religiously sanctioned superiority over other life forms, but also, argues that humans, just like all other animals, can only be understood using naturalized means of explanation. Hampshire addresses this when he states,

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84 Hampshire, xxv
85 Ibid, xxi
86 Bennett, 36
87 This superiority stems from the Book of Genesis, chapter 1 verse 29 and 30, which states, “God also said: “See I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the animals of the land, all birds of the air, and all the living creature that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food.””
nothing is supernatural, and the distinguished powers of human beings, including their peculiar power of reflexive thought, are the products of natural processes. When we are inclined to think of ourselves as utterly superior creatures, we should also look downwards in the natural order and recognize that we are animals with peculiarly large and peculiarly complex brains. The peculiarly large and complex brains are linked to powers of thought at a level of complexity, which other animals do not attain.

Before moving to the next chapter, it is necessary to do a brief recapitulation of the ideas presented in this first chapter. It is first and foremost imperative to realize that whether or not one reads Spinoza as an atheist, such a reading will have repercussions in how Spinoza is understood. In order to understand what those repercussions are, it is first necessary to understand what it means to label Spinoza as an atheist. Two possible ways of understanding the term have been addressed above. On the one hand, an atheist can be understood as someone who simply shows irreverence towards or rejects organized or institutional religion. On the other hand, one can understand an atheist as someone who not only rejects religion as such, but also rejects a supreme being called God. In order to understand whether or not one of these labels fits Spinoza, it is further necessary to understand what his conception of substance or God is.

Regarding Spinoza’s understanding of substance or God, a few things can be stated. First, Spinoza’s overall metaphysical structure is composed of three main components: substance, attributes, and modes. Second, substance or God is necessarily self-caused given that its essence is to exist and its existence is it essence. Substance or God also comprises the whole of reality and is absolutely infinite in reach and eternal in existence. Moreover, the attributes are what express the infinite

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Hampshire, xxi-xxii
and eternal essence and existence of substance or God. This expression is further made manifest through the modification of substance or God by the modes. All of this is possible because God is the immanent cause of all that is the case.
“When you say that you do not see what sort of God I have if I deny it the actions of seeing, hearing, attending, willing, etc., and that he possesses those faculties in an eminent degree, I suspect that you believe there is no greater perfection than can be explicated by the afore-mentioned attributes. I am not surprised, for I believe that a triangle, if it could speak, would likewise say that God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God’s nature is eminently circular. In this way each would ascribe to God its own attributes, assuming itself to be like God regarding all else as ill-formed.”

- Spinoza (Letter 56)

“That ‘necessary’ and ‘free’ are contraries seems no less absurd and opposed to reason. Nobody can deny that God freely knows himself and all other things, and yet all are unanimous in granting that God knows himself necessarily.”

- Spinoza (Letter 56)
Chapter Two

Although there are thirty-six propositions in Part I of the Ethics, this chapter will only discuss the first fifteen.¹ This approach is taken for two reasons: on the one hand, it is within these propositions that Spinoza “presents the basic elements of his picture of God”², on the other hand, given what this thesis is attempting to consider, going too far a field of these propositions would only distract from determining whether or not Spinoza’s philosophy can be read as atheistic.

Despite the fact that much of the information covered here has already been presented in chapter one, this chapter will not simply echo what has already been stated. Instead, through a close examination of these propositions, a more robust God will emerge from the pages of the Ethics, especially since the understanding of Spinoza’s substance or God presented in chapter one was necessarily underdeveloped and it is not until the first fifteen propositions of the Ethics that it receives its fullest and most vibrant expression.

Following this, there will be a discussion on the often misunderstood division that Spinoza draws between natura naturans and natura naturata in the scholium to proposition 29. Frederick C. Beiser highlights the importance of this misunderstanding: “To brand [Spinoza] an atheist was simply to confuse the natura

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¹ Propositions one through fifteen except proposition nine will be covered in this chapter. Proposition nine, although important for Spinoza’s overall project, does not fit within the scope of concern for this thesis and therefore it shall not be discussed.

² Nadler, 53 – On this topic Richard Popkin wrote, “It is amazing that the core of Spinoza’s metaphysics is worked out in Part I in the first fifteen propositions, covering ten pages.” Richard Popkin. Spinoza, (OneWorld: Oxford, 2004), pp. 80
naturans, the immanent and infinite creative force of nature, with the natura
naturata, the sum total of all finite things.\textsuperscript{3}

**Propositions 1 – 15**

**Proposition 1**

As previously mentioned, the first proposition states that, “substance is prior in nature to its affections.” As should now be evident, a substance is \textit{prior} because of its necessarily existing essence, or, its self-causation. Spinoza demonstrates the truth of this proposition by referring the reader to the third and fifth definitions, which have already been discussed.

In his article entitled \textit{Substance and Its Modes}, H.F. Hallett decides to take a closer look at what it means to claim that substance is prior in nature to its modes or affections. Hallet begins by addressing the important role that \textit{causation} plays in Spinoza’s philosophy. According to Hallett, “the conception of causation is fundamental in the philosophy of Spinoza; but it is causation conceived as action, and not as the mere regular sequence of inactive events.”\textsuperscript{4} Causation for Spinoza is not a static tabulation of causes in relation to their effects – that \( x \) caused \( y \) to take place.\textsuperscript{5}

Such a conception of causation is far too flaccid and unable to explain the productive

\textsuperscript{5} “He had no interest in logic and no regard for it, seeing it as a branch of something like mental hygiene. It was only mentioned once in the \textit{Ethics}, and very rarely elsewhere in his work. This would seem a strange lapse in someone so keen to reduce so much to logic, and it is a fact that, alone, ought to worry anyone wanting to interpret his thinking in \textit{logical terms}” - Mason, 57. On this topic Bennett commented that “Spinoza was interested in logic only for the good it could do him. Had he cared more about it for itself, he might have used it better doing philosophy, just as a carpenter might be saved from some failures if he chanced to be interested in glue for itself as well as for its service in holding things together. Leibniz was, among other things, a connoisseur of glue: his \textit{New Essays}, for example, are full of his pleasure in logical relations as an inherently interesting topic of study. There is nothing like that in Spinoza.” – Bennett, 28
expression that is the causal power of substance or God. Although, to avoid confusion, it must be pointed out that with this understanding of causation Spinoza is not discarding logical causation. Bennett explains this when he writes that, “[Spinoza] thinks that a cause relates to its effect as a premise does to a conclusion which follows from it. When he speaks of ‘the reason or cause why Nature acts’, he thinks he is talking about one relation, not two.”6 In other words, for Spinoza, there cannot, and is not, a difference to be found between what is causally necessary and logically necessary. It is for this reason that Hallett rightly characterizes Spinoza’s conception of causation as something that can only be understood as an act and that causality is to be understood as an active occurrence and not just a logical structure.7 Hallett expands on this when he states that, “by ‘action’ is signified the distinction in unity of ‘potency’ and its ‘actuality’. To say that something is ‘actual’ is to imply that it is the determinate actuality of some potency-in-act.”8 Therefore, to argue as Spinoza does, that substance is the necessary efficient cause9 of all that is in existence and that nothing can be understood outside this causality, is not to lay claim to some static theory of causation. Instead, it is to argue that causation is the necessary action, undertaken by substance, in order to bring into existence all that is the case. In having attributed such causal power to substance, Spinoza has in effect stated that action is “essentially eternal, and becomes durational only by limitation and

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6 Bennett, 30
7 According to Hampshire, for Spinoza “cause is taken to be anything which explains the existence or qualities of the effect.” He expands on this when he writes, “to Spinoza to ‘explain’ means to show that one true proposition is the logically necessary consequence of some other; explanation essentially involves exhibiting necessary connections, and ‘necessary connection’ in this context means a strictly logical connection to be discovered by logical analysis of the ideas involved.” Hampshire, 39 & 40
8 Hallett, 131
9 “God is the efficient cause of all things which can fall under an infinite intellect.” (Ip16cor2)
modification."\textsuperscript{10} Although not immediately transparent, what allows Spinoza to make such a claim is the two-tiered division between \textit{natura naturans} and \textit{natura naturata}, which will be discussed below. What can be addressed now is that by collapsing causation into action, Spinoza is attempting "to derive all things from a primordial infinite power or indeterminate potency self-actualized in an infinite and exhaustively determinate eternal universe."\textsuperscript{11} In other words, for Spinoza, substance should be understood as the causal nexus for all things, which encompasses two actions simultaneously. On the one hand, substance is to be understood as the indeterminate seat of all causal activity. On the other hand, substance is to be understood via its modifications, as indeterminate potency put into action through different means of determined limitation or modifications. In other words, given the immanent nature of God’s causality, all things are an expression of the infinite force that is God in action. Or, as Hallett phrases it, all things are an expression of God resulting “from the self-actualizing creative potency-in-act.”\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, no actualization of substance can be understood separately from substance and substance is causally actualized via its many different modifications or affections. In the end, what Spinoza wants is not mere static artifice or structure; instead he wants “real causality.”\textsuperscript{13}

With this, Spinoza’s \textit{explanatory rationalism}, which states that an \textit{effect} is the result of some \textit{cause} that can be understood and explained, comes squarely into focus. Bennett expands on this, writing that, “Spinoza did not distinguish what was absolutely or logically necessary from what is merely causally necessary. In this way

\textsuperscript{10} Hallett, 131
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 131
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 131
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 132
of thinking, there is a single relation of necessary connection, which links causes with
effects in real causal chains and premises with conclusions in valid arguments."¹⁴ No
commentator has focused more on this aspect of Spinoza’s philosophy than Michael
Della Rocca. In his recent text on Spinoza, Della Rocca argues that the concept of
explanatory rationalism, or, as Della Rocca labels it, Spinoza’s Principle of Sufficient
Reason, “presupposes that everything is able to be explained.”¹⁵ Moreover, Spinoza’s
“commitment to intelligibility is extremely ambitious in at least two respects. First he
insists that each thing is intelligible, there are no facts impervious to explanation.
Second, he holds that these explanations are – in principle – graspable by us.”¹⁶ For
Spinoza, then, all things have a reason for being as they are. This is not to be
confused with the glib saying – “Everything happens for a reason” – that highlights
the belief that all actions and their accompanying outcomes are understood as having
taken place for some teleological fulfillment of a cosmically unexplainable destiny.

For Spinoza, nothing happens by accident or without cause. All things do
happen for a reason, insofar as reason is understood as cause and, further still,
everything that happens can be explained. As such, all modifications or affections
can be understood, regardless of how complex or confusing they appear to be.

Bennett is deeply unsettled by this part of Spinoza’s philosophy because it
negates any potential for what Bennett calls brute facts. According to Bennett,
“Spinoza assumed that whatever is the case can be explained – that if P then there is a
reason why P ... It is the refusal to admit brute facts – ones which just are so, for no

¹⁴ Bennett (1996), 61
¹⁶ Ibid, 2
Bennett goes on to state that, “if he demands to know how a given fact could be inexplicable, the answer may be that it just is; and that answer, since it leads nowhere, must be safe.”

It is because of the inability to allow for such brute facts that Bennett thinks Spinoza’s position is “therefore untenable.”

Despite the fact that he holds this position, Bennett nonetheless concedes that there is an “attractiveness of the idea that everything can in principle be explained.”

Bennett’s argument against Spinoza’s position is weak, to say the least. Arguing against explanatory rationalism using brute facts as a rebuttal does not in any way even begin to dent Spinoza’s position. Simply because we may not immediately know why something happened, does not in any way mean that it simply happened for no reason. The lack of understanding as to why something happened is not a result of actions having no cause, rather it is a result of not knowing what that cause is. Although not mentioned by Bennett, a good example of a brute fact is the seemingly random nature of the quantum world. The world of the very small, at least to date, has presented itself as a place where randomness reigns supreme and is trumpeted as an impenetrable argument against the determined world view. It may in fact turn out that the quantum world is as random as we now know it to be, but for Spinoza, such an understanding is not a refutation of explanatory rationalism.

Instead, it is proof of the underdeveloped understanding that we currently have of the

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17 Bennett, 29
18 Ibid, 29
19 Ibid, 29
20 Ibid, 29 – Concerning this aspect of Spinoza’s philosophy, Richard Mason writes, “Ineffability has no place in his thinking. Not only can we understand God but – surely in contradiction not only to most mystical writing but to almost all Christian and Jewish thinking – we must be able to understand God. One of his most extraordinary claims is that ‘God’s infinite essence and his eternity are known to all’: nature is open and transparent to us. Nothing can be esoteric.” – Mason, 3
world of the very small. Even if the world of the very small were indeed shown to be random, by further research, Spinoza’s position would be unchanged. After all, substance or God, for Spinoza, is completely open or transparent and any confusion is our fault, not that of substance or God.

Whether or not Bennett will allow for explanatory rationalism is secondary to the fact that for Spinoza, God is the absolutely infinite and eternal cause behind everything. Furthermore, because we can understand substance or God, we can understand all of its modifications. Again, confusion is caused by an inadequate understanding of substance or God, and not by the lack of intelligibility of substance or God. As Della Rocca writes,

\[\text{for Spinoza, all things that exist follow from the very nature of God and follow from the nature with logical or conceptual necessity. For Spinoza, if one really understood what the nature of God is, one would see that it’s absolutely necessary that God exists and that all things that we observe in the world exist. All existence is necessary existence, all truth is necessary truth, and the source of this existence and truth is simply God’s nature}\]

Such an understanding of causation has deep practical and ethical implications as well. If action \textit{is} causation, and people \textit{are} what they do, and what they do \textit{is} a modification of substance, then all actions are immanently entwined within substance or God. This position leads to Spinoza attempting an ethical outlook that is, according to Bertrand Russell, “magnificent, and rouses admiration even in those who do not think it successful.”

\[\text{Della Rocca, 10}\]
\[\text{Russell, 553}\]
Propositions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

With these propositions Spinoza begins to address what has come to be understood as his *substance monism*. The five propositions that built this position unfold as follows:

**Prop. 2** – *Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another.*

**Prop. 3** – *If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other.*

**Prop. 4** – *Two or more distinct things are distinguished from one another, either by a difference in the attributes of the substances or by a difference in their affections.*

**Prop. 5** – *In Nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.*

**Prop. 6** – *One substance cannot be produced by another substance.*

To start, it is necessary to keep Spinoza’s definition of substance in mind because it is used as a demonstration for the second proposition, acting as the proof for why it is that two substances with two sets of attributes have nothing in common. After all, if substance is, by definition, the cause of itself and the causal nexus for all modifications in existence, and if those same modifications conceive substance through its attributes, it is not possible for there to be any common ground between multiple substances and multiple attributes.

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23 In an earlier footnote, it was discussed that Spinoza thinks the definitions in the *Ethics* are the kind that states true propositions regarding the nature of the thing defined. With the discussion of Spinoza’s propositions, the strength of this claim is put to the test. If the definitions are faulty the propositions do not work.
Spinoza follows this up in the third proposition with the logically and causally necessary consequence that, if two substances have nothing at all in common with one another, then modes or things cannot have anything in common with one another. Spinoza's demonstration of this reads as follows: "if they have nothing in common with one another, then (by A5) they cannot be understood through one another, and so (by A4) one cannot be the cause of the other, q.e.d." The important words to pay attention to in this demonstration are: "they cannot be understood through one another", because in light of Spinoza's explanatory rationalism, such a conceptual confusion is not acceptable. As will become clear below, this proposition is also a thinly veiled precursor for what Spinoza is really interested in demonstrating with the sixth proposition.

In the fourth proposition Spinoza uses the following words to demonstrate that things are distinguished in one of two ways, either by attribute or affection:

Whatever is, is either in itself or in another (by A1), that is (by D3 and D5), outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affections. 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.

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24 Axiom five reads: "Things that have nothing in common with one another also cannot be understood through one another, or the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other."
25 Axiom four reads: "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause."
26 Axiom one reads: "Whatever is, is either in itself or in another."
27 Definition three reads: "By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed."
28 Definition five reads: "By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived."
29 Definition four reads: "By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence."
With this demonstration, Spinoza discloses something very important regarding the nature of the attributes. Separate from the intellect, there is nothing in existence except substance and its affections. Understood in this way, the attributes are not distinguishable from substance, but are instead seen as identical with it. That is, from the vantage point of the intellect, attributes are in some measure, conceptually separate from substance. But when the intellect is not taken into consideration, substance and attribute (much like substance and God) are collapsible into one another. As Nadler writes,

the words ‘substance’ and ‘attribute,’ he insists ... are two names for the same thing, just as the names ‘Israel’ and ‘Jacob’ refer to the same Biblical individual. Each name simply stresses a different feature of the thing named: ‘substance’ refers to its ontological status ... while ‘attribute’ refers to the fact that it has a distinctive character or nature.\(^{30}\)

Therefore, according to Nadler, “there is a conceptual distinction between substance and attribute (I can conceive separately what it is to be a substance and what it is to be an attribute), there is not a real distinction between them.”\(^{31}\) And so, if substance and attribute are two different ways of stating the same thing, only substance really exists, or, what really exist are attributes and affections, they are one and the same thing. With this added information, the attributes are not only the means by which substance expresses its essence, but they are also simultaneously substance. Difference for Spinoza, then, can be expressed in two mutually inclusive ways, either as substance or affection. As will be discussed below, Spinoza is able to draw this distinction because of natura naturans and natura naturata.

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\(^{30}\) Nadler, 57 & 58

\(^{31}\) Nadler, 57
With the fifth proposition, Spinoza attempts to demonstrate the uniqueness of substance or God by using the proof for the fourth proposition as proof for the fifth proposition. In the demonstration for the fifth proposition, Spinoza writes that, “if there were two or more distinct substances, they would have to be distinguished from one another either by a difference in their attributes, or by a difference in their affections (by P4).” As is now clear, this is a contradiction in terms for Spinoza. It is not possible for there to be two substances with the same nature.

In the sixth proposition Spinoza finally addresses the issue of the uniqueness of substance directly. In the demonstration for this proposition Spinoza writes that,

in Nature there cannot be two substances of the same attribute (by P5), that is (by P2), which have something in common with each other. Therefore (by P3) one cannot be the cause of the other, or cannot be produced by the other, q.e.d.

With all of the above-mentioned information, it now becomes clear as to why two or more substances are both logically and causally untenable. That is, if substance is causally independent, and (given the definition of substance) if it is logically and causally contradictory for two or more substances to hold anything in common and if all things depend on the casual power of substance, then it is not possible for there to be two or more substances in existence. It is not possible for one substance to be the cause of another substance. Therefore, there can only be one substance, and not two or more, in existence.

In chapter one it was briefly mentioned that labeling Spinoza a substance monist was possibly misguided, although not completely incorrect. With the information presented from propositions two through six, it now becomes clear why.
Although there cannot be two or more substances in existence, it does not stand to reason that this would imply that there is only one substance that exists. After all, as Spinoza was earlier quoted as stating, it is an improper conceptualization to refer to substance or God using the numerical signifier one. Such an understanding says nothing regarding the true nature of substance or God. In other words, to say that there is only one substance implies that there is something else that substance is understood through or in relation to – that there is something that sequentially follows after substance or God. In order for there to be a number one, there must be a number two that substance or God stands in relation to, and is understood with. Because substance is the only entity conceivable through itself, it does not need relational additions in order to understand it and it does not stand in sequential ordering to anything else. Therefore, there is only substance.

Propositions 7 & 11

Although these propositions are numerically separate, dealing with them together helps to highlight the fact that they are actually saying the same thing. The only difference between the two propositions is the words used to express the concepts in the propositions, and not the propositions themselves, strictly speaking. That is, proposition seven is a less detailed and refined version of proposition eleven.

The two propositions are:

Prop. 7 – It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.

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32 "God can only improperly be called one or single. For we do not conceive things under the category of numbers unless they are included in a common class. For example, he who holds in his hand a penny and a dollar will not think of the number two unless he can apply a common name to his penny and dollar, that is, pieces of money or coins. For then he can say that he has two pieces of money or a coin. Hence it is clear that a thing cannot be called one or single unless another thing has been conceived which, as I have said, agrees with it. Now since the existence of God is his very essence, and since we can form no universal idea of his essence, it is certain that he who calls God one or single has no true idea of God, or is speaking of him very improperly." – Letter 50
Prop. 11 – God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.

To prove proposition seven Spinoza argues that “a substance cannot be produced by anything else (by P6C)\(^3\); therefore it will be the cause of itself, that is (by D1)\(^4\), its essence necessarily involves existence, or it pertains to its nature to exist, q.e.d.” As has now been well established, only substance can produce substance, and since it cannot be produced by another substance, only substance is causally self-generating, and, therefore, substance necessarily exists.

The demonstration for the eleventh proposition is as follows: “if you deny this, conceive if you can, that God does not exist. Therefore (by A 7)\(^5\) his essence does not involve existence. But this (by P7) is absurd. Therefore God necessarily exists, q.e.d.” Spinoza, as an alternate demonstration, utilizes his explanatory rationalism when he states that, “for each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence.” And given how Spinoza defines substance and God, it stands to reason that “there can be no reason or cause which prevents God from existing, or which takes his existence away, it must certainly be inferred that he necessarily exists.” Given the absurdity of this proposition’s negation (that God doesn’t exist), God is an entity, which entails complete affirmation through its infinite attributes that express an eternal and infinite

\(^{33}\) The corollary to proposition six reads: “From this it follows that a substance cannot be produced by anything else. For in Nature there is nothing except substances and their affections, as is evident from A 1, D3, and D5. But it cannot be produced by a substance (by P6). Therefore, substance absolutely cannot be produced by anything else, q.e.d.”

\(^{34}\) Definition one reads: “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.”

\(^{35}\) Axiom seven reads: “If a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence.”
essence. Or, an infinite and eternal God, with an infinity of attributes necessarily exists. This of course is a well-trodden proof for the existence of God that has its roots in St. Anselm’s version of the Ontological Proof. It is a proof also employed by Descartes and severely criticized by Kant. It is a proof that, for some, lacks the necessary impact of being convincing.

To understand Spinoza’s argument for God’s existence as a means of persuading anyone into thinking that God exists would be to overstate his intentions. Richard Mason highlights this potential overextension when he writes that Spinoza’s argument

has all the appearance of the self-supporting logic, which could only persuade a reader already willing to accept its conclusions. But that assumes that we see here a “proof”, which is meant to convert an unbeliever; and that is entirely unlikely. And the function of ‘proof’ – demonstratio – is more like one of dismantling a clock to demonstrate how its parts work together.\footnote{Mason, 35}

In the end, what Spinoza is trying to accomplish with his proofs for the existence of substance or God, is not conversion. Rather, he is attempting to show how ‘faith’ in the existence of God can be proven utilizing certain propositions and demonstrations.

\textit{Proposition 8}

Although a small amount of attention has been paid thus far to the concept of \textit{infinity}, it is with the eighth proposition that Spinoza really begins to explain what he means when he proposes that: \textit{substance or God is infinite.}

\textit{Prop. 8 – Every substance is necessarily infinite.}

To demonstrate the truth of this proposition Spinoza states that,
of its nature [substance] will exist either as finite or as infinite. But not as
finite. For then (by D2) it would have to be limited by something else of the
same nature, which would also have to exist necessarily (by P7), and so there
would be two substances of the same attribute, which is absurd (by P5).
Therefore, it exists as infinite, q.e.d.

In the previous chapter when discussing the second definition, it was revealed
that only finite things have a nature that is not causally necessary and are therefore
limited by other finite things. In order for a substance to be finite, there would need
to be another substance in existence that limits its existence. This is of course by
definition, a contradiction, and substance cannot contradict substance, leading to the
conclusion that substance is infinite or without limit.

With regards to Spinoza’s employment of infinity, Nadler writes that
Spinoza’s demonstration is “relatively weak.” The weakness of this demonstration
for Nadler points to a problem that is often raised in the secondary literature.
According to Nadler, the problem is

that he has established by this is that a substance with one attribute is infinite
only in its own kind, since there is no other substance of the same nature or
attribute to limit it. And this means that it is still possible that there are a great
many substances, each with one attribute, each necessarily existing, each
eternal, and each infinite in its own kind37

As should be immediately clear, this is a false problem. As far as Spinoza is
concerned, there can only be substance, which is the causal nexus for all attributes
and modifications. Anything more, as has been demonstrated above, is simply not
allowed by Spinoza. Moreover, even if it was possible for there to be more than one
substance and more than one source for attributes and modifications, they would be

37 Nadler, 67
so unintelligible that we would have absolutely no way to know that they exist because we would have no way of understanding their existence. In the end, when Spinoza states that substance is infinite, he wants to show that it is not "relative infinitude but absolute infinitude."  

In the scholium to this proposition, Spinoza argues that part of the reason people have traditionally had trouble understanding or accepting this idea is because of an anthropomorphic misconception that is falsely attributed to God's nature. As he writes, "those who confuse the divine nature with the human easily ascribe human affects to God." One of those confusions is the habit, largely propagated via an understanding of God as a transcendent first cause, to ascribe to God the same temporal qualities that we would normally ascribe to different modifications or affections. Spinoza expands on this further when he writes that, "so it happens that they fictitiously ascribe to substances the beginning which they see that natural things have; for those who do not know the true cause of things confuse everything and without any conflict of mind feign that both trees and men speak, imagine that any form whatever is changed into any other." In other words, understanding God as a transcendent first cause or the unmoved mover is no different than understanding a tree as something that has the ability to talk. For Spinoza, such ideas are not only absurd, but they are also superstitious.

Although the distinction may be subtle, Spinoza's position cannot be confused with this Aristotelian and Judeo-Christian idea. Understanding God as the transcendent first cause carries with it the assumption that there was a time before

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38 Ibid, 67
God decided to create the universe and the world. This idea finds its most famous expression in the Book of Genesis, which argues that before God created the world and universe, there was nothing. Then one day God spoke the universe and the world into existence. Seven days later, God was finished and took a rest.

As has already been mentioned, everything that exists does so within God, and therefore God is the immanent and not the transitive cause of all that exists. Whatever comes into existence, already existed before under some other limitation or modification. Therefore, it is not possible for God to be the first cause of anything. God is an infinite and eternal cause, which has always existed, and will always exist. It is not possible for substance or God not to exist, and so, it is not possible for existence not to exist. Therefore, it is not possible for substance or God to create anything. Extending from this, every modification that is expressed by God was not created by God, because it existed in some other way prior to its expression as the limitation that it currently finds itself expressed as. Take the planet earth for example, which, from a Judeo-Christian viewpoint, is understood, along with the human, as one of God’s greatest creations. If Spinoza’s non-anthropomorphic understanding of God is correct, then the world, with all of its’ myriad of difference and plentitude, existed before becoming the world we now know it to be today. Moreover, if God were in fact able, in any meaningful sense of the term, to be the first cause of existence, the same problem discussed above regarding whether or not Spinoza was a substance monist would apply. God, as the first cause, would only make sense in relation to what it creates. And as has already been shown, this is absurd.
**Propositions 10, 12, 13**

The three propositions are:

**Prop. 10** – *Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself.*

**Prop. 12** – *No attribute of a substance can be truly conceived from which it follows that the substance can be divided.*

**Prop. 13** – *A substance which is absolutely infinite is indivisible.*

So far there have been two important features of the attributes, which have been discussed. The first one concerned their ability to express God’s essence to the intellect. The second one was that, from a certain vantage point, substance and attributes are not in any real way distinct from one another. The tenth proposition presents further information about the nature of the attributes: *the attributes are conceivable through themselves.*

This feature, given the collapsibility of substance and its attributes, should come as no real surprise. Spinoza demonstrates the truth of this proposition by stating that, “for an attribute is what the intellect perceives concerning a substance, as constituting its essence (by D4); so (by D3) it must be conceived through it self, q.e.d.” With this demonstration, Spinoza offers no new information. He simply uses the definitions of the attribute and substance to show that the attributes must be understood through themselves. In other words, because the attributes each express the absolutely infinite and eternal essence of substance and because substance is unique, each attribute expresses this uniqueness through itself. Therefore, each
attribute expresses substance through itself, and must therefore be conceived through itself. In the scholium to this demonstration Spinoza adds 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, or two different substances. For it is of the nature of a substance that each of its attributes is conceived through itself, since all the attributes it has have always been in it together, and one could not be produced by another, but each expresses the reality, or being of substance

It can now be said that the attributes express the essence of substance because they are the way that different modifications perceive substance given that they are substance considered from a modal vantage point. Therefore, attributes must be understood through themselves.

The twelfth and thirteenth propositions are saying the exact same thing. The main difference between these two propositions is the inclusion of the attributes in proposition twelve, whereas proposition thirteen deals with the same concern, only this time taking substance and attributes as synonymous with one another. It is for this reason that only the twelfth proposition will be discussed.

As will become more concrete in the third and fourth chapter, Spinoza states these propositions to avoid confusion around the fact that he allows “corporeal substance” to be an attribute of substance. This is of course not allowed as an attribute by the Judeo-Christian conception of substance or God. They would argue that corporeality is not an attribute of God directly because of its divisibility. As will become clear, Spinoza agrees that substance or God is not divisible, but he sees no reason why this excludes the corporeal from being an attribute of substance or God. If everything exists in and because of substance or God, how is it possible to deny the attribute of corporeality to substance or God? In part, what allows Spinoza to claim
the indivisibility of substance was the division between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.

The demonstration of the indivisibility of substance goes as follows “for the parts into which a substance so conceived would be divided either will retain the nature of the substance or will not.” Once again, most, if not all, of the information needed to understand this position has already been proposed and demonstrated by Spinoza. All that is needed to understand his point clearly is his refutation of the plurality of substances discussed in chapter one and his refutation of two or more substances discussed above. If substance could in any real way be divided into parts, this would imply that there is a substance pluralism at work, which is of course not allowed by Spinoza. Also, given that parts are by definition, limited modifications, and since substance or God is infinite and eternal, it is not possible to limit the creative expression of God in action in any real way. Furthermore, simply because substance or God can be conceptually split from its attributes, this does not imply that those attributes lead to substance or God being divisible. Therefore, substance or God, properly conceived, is not divisible into parts.

*Propositions 14 & 15*

The two propositions are:

Prop. 14 – *Except God, no substance can be or be conceived.*

Prop. 15 – *Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.*

At this point in the thesis, these two propositions are adding no real new information. They are simply reinforcing what has hitherto been proposed. It is for this reason that this section will deal with the scholium to proposition fifteen, where
Spinoza momentarily drops the ridged defenses of the geometric method and addresses, the ideas he is explicating through his propositions and their demonstrations, in more straightforward prose.

Although lengthy, the first part of the scholium does an excellent job of conveying the ideas Spinoza had been demonstrating up to this point clearly. Given the value of this scholium it is worth quoting at length:

There are those who feign a God, like a man, consisting of a body and a mind, and subject to passions. But how far they wander from the true knowledge of God, is sufficiently established by what has already been demonstrated. Them I dismiss. For everyone who has to any extent contemplated the divine nature denies that God is corporeal. They prove this best from the fact that by body we understand any quantity, with length, breadth, and depth, limited by some certain figure. Nothing more absurd than this can be said of God, namely, of a being absolutely infinite. But meanwhile, by the other arguments by which they strive to demonstrate this same conclusion they clearly show that they entirely remove corporeal, or extended, substance itself from divine nature. And they maintain that it has been created by God. But by what divine power could it be created? They are completely ignorant of that. And this shows clearly that they do not understand what they themselves say. At any rate, I have demonstrated clearly enough – in my judgment, at least – that no substance can be produced or created by another thing. Next, we have shown that except for God, no substance can either be or be conceived, and hence we have concluded that extended substance is one of God’s infinite attributes.

If nothing else, then at least stylistically, the Spinoza of the propositions and demonstrations is not the same Spinoza of the scholia. That is, in the scholia, the reader meets a Spinoza that is humorous and sarcastic. He even allows himself to be dismissive of positions he does not agree with. For example, when he brushes aside anyone who understands God anthropomorphically. Gone then, is the sterility and hygiene of the propositions and demonstrations. Deleuze captures the essence of the scholia in writing that, “on their own, the scholia form a book of Anger and Laughter,
as if it were Spinoza’s anti-Bible."\textsuperscript{39} Deleuze expands on this, “the scholia are ostensive and polemical. It is true that the scholia most often refer to other scholia, we can see that in themselves they constitute a specific chain, distinct from that of the demonstrative and discursive elements.”\textsuperscript{40} It is as if, only after painstakingly demonstrating each proposition of his argument, that he feels free enough to express himself without fear of reproach or misunderstanding.

\textit{Natura Naturans and Natura Naturata}

As will become clear in this section and in the following chapters, if this distinction is not properly understood, it is very easy to misunderstand many of the arguments Spinoza tries to make.

Spinoza introduces this division in the scholium to proposition twenty-nine where he writes,

“\textit{by Natura naturans we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, that is, God, insofar as [it] is considered as a free cause.}”

[And]

“\textit{by Natura naturata I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any of God’s attributes, that is, all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.}”

In addressing the importance of this division, Bennett comments that, “in passing I should mention some technical terminology which has grabbed the attention of some

\textsuperscript{39} Deleuze (1997), pp. 27
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 27
readers of the *Ethics* and has been accorded an importance which it does not have.”

He goes on to argue that it “is quite without significance.” Bennett’s reason for such a dismissive evaluation of this division is that it is only mentioned once in the *Ethics* to help demonstrate “that intellect is not to be equated with thought and is only a mode of it [therefore] intellect … is not itself an attribute.”

In order to understand where Bennett goes wrong in his understanding of this division, it is necessary to first look at what each side of the division means. The first one, *natura naturans*, or Nature Naturing, is another way to conceptualize substance or God. It is, in a word, God understood without any relationality. The second part of the division is *natura naturata* or Nature Natured. It is, God understood as a modification or limitation of its expressive potential put into action.

For the purposes of argument, we can treat these two concepts as neatly distinct whereas Spinoza’s system would see them as non-divisible and yet requiring an intellectual distinction for explanatory purposes. Take for example the first division that was discussed above regarding God as a process and God as a series of modifications, affects. As should be immediately clear, what allowed Spinoza to make this differentiation was his division between Nature Naturing and Nature Natured. On the one hand, God understood as process, is just another way of stating that God can be understood as Nature Naturing. On the other hand, God as understood as modification or limitation, is just another way of understanding Nature Natured. Also discussed above was how difference functioned for Spinoza. When

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41 Bennett, 118 & 119
42 Ibid, 119
43 Ibid, 119
we speak of Nature Naturing we are speaking of substance in process. And when we speak of Nature Natured we are concerned with modifications or particulars. Further, the indivisibility of substance or God, which will be discussed in more detail in the last two chapters, can be understood more adequately when this division is applied. Above it was mentioned that substance or God was not divisible, but that in no way meant that corporeality was not a part of substance or God. Substance or God understood, as Nature Naturing is not divisible. Understood this way, substance or God is infinite, eternal and unique – God as understood as having no parts, or, God as understood only in relation to itself – without relationality. No modification represents this non-relational aspect of God, for example, a sunset or a tree does not represent God in any sense. Nature Natured is substance or God understood as modifications or effects of Nature Naturing and because the modifications are expressed by substance and understood via the attributes, it is conceptually possible to understand God as divisible. Given that God is a non-relational entity that is not divisible, modifications are nothing more than conceptual differences, not real differences.

Returning back to Bennett’s criticism of this distinction we can see that the rejection of this distinction is misguided. Although Bennett is right to take issue with the hair-splitting surrounding these concepts but nonetheless this is a conceptual distinction as has been clearly demonstrated above which is central to Spinoza’s system, terminological quibbles aside. Keeping this in mind we can observe its development in the argument in this thesis and not be circumscribed by Bennett’s position.
Chapter Three

"Maybe we're nothing but skin and bone
Blare and rubber
Eyes that blubber
Teeth that bite
Hands that slight

Still I'm trying to do the best I can
But I'm a limited, primitive kind of man

Maybe we're nothing but skin and bone
Nerves that shatter
Tongues that flatter
Lips that mutter
Lashes that flutter"

- Elvis Costello
Chapter Three

Antonio Negri, Warren Montag, Etienne Balibar, and Jonathan Israel, among others, have all stated that Spinoza is a materialist. Roughly speaking a philosophical materialism holds that all phenomena are explainable in terms of matter, that is to say, physical processes. For instance, a materialist will argue that cognition is nothing more than the physical activity of the brain and that consciousness is a by-product of this activity. As Henri Bergson notes, “now the essence of every form of materialism is to maintain … that consciousness, with all its functions, is born of the mere interplay of material elements.”\footnote{Henri Bergson. Matter and Memory translated Nancy Margaret Paul & W. Scott Palmer. (New York: Zone Books, 2005), pp. 72} Taken on its own, this claim is not overly problematic. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that these readings are very rarely justified, explained or qualified. However, this is not always the situation. Steven Nadler, for example, does address the issue at some length, but in the end never comes to any firm resolution. Stuart Hampshire and Edwin Curley further attempt in their own ways and with varying degrees of success to demonstrate how Spinoza is a materialist. It is for this reason that these two commentators will be given special attention in the final chapter. There is, after all no denying the fact that Spinoza goes out of his way to incorporate corporeal substance into his philosophy. With this inclusion, and the reading of him as a materialist, there are two questions that need to be directly addressed and dealt with. The first question will be addressed in this chapter and the second question will be addressed in the final chapter. They are as follows: How does corporeality function within Spinoza’s philosophy and does this commit his philosophy to a kind of materialism? As will become clear throughout
these two remaining chapters, these questions do not immediately elicit a binary response.

In order to establish whether or not Spinoza is a materialist, it will first be necessary to discuss the concept of *matter* and what it means to label his philosophy as a kind of materialism. For this reason this chapter will begin by discussing what *matter* is. In order to accomplish this, certain ways of understanding the term will be investigated utilizing ideas from physics discussed by Frank Wilczek in his book *The Lightness of Being*. Following this will be a discussion involving certain sections of Part II of the *Ethics* entitled *Of the Nature and Origin Of the Mind*. Although this part of the *Ethics* is normally associated with Spinoza’s epistemology and philosophy of mind, it is here that the information needed to pose the question of Spinoza’s materialism will be found. It is here that Spinoza more fully explores the place that *corporeality* has in his philosophy.

Following the discussion on matter, this chapter will then deal with the first two propositions of Part II, which further outline what the attributes are. This will be followed by a discussion on the first definition of Part II, which deals with Spinoza’s understanding of what a *body* is. A discussion on the differences between the *infinite* modifications and the *mediate* modifications will then be examined. Particular attention will be paid to this division, given that without a proper understanding of how these two concepts function within Spinoza’s philosophy, it is very easy to misunderstand not only substance or God, but also how it is that corporeality functions in his philosophy. This will lead into a more general discussion on how Spinoza understands the functioning of bodies, both in relation to themselves and to
one another. In order to do this, axiom four and the first three postulates will be discussed. This will lead into a discussion on proposition seven; a discussion on Spinoza’s *parallelism* doctrine. Finally, this chapter will end with a discussion on how it is that Spinoza solves the *mind/body* problem inherited from Descartes.

**Matter**

Before beginning it is necessary to make a few preliminary remarks. First, it must be noted that the information being utilized here from physics is not intended as a complete or final word on the topic of matter or materialism. Instead, the ideas that will be discussed are intended as aids to help construct a concept of matter that can be used to frame the discussion on Spinoza’s materialism and how it is that corporeality functions within his philosophy. Second, these ideas are underdeveloped and are therefore not intended as complete positions relating to physics or its understanding of matter. In other words, what will be utilized in this section are the results of certain investigations into matter undertaken by physicists. Their means of investigation, both experimentally and mathematically, will not be discussed and are beyond the scope of this thesis. Further, this thesis shall remain silent on all matters scientific as they relate to matter, and, is instead only interested in the information’s philosophical value.

The physicist and Nobel laureate Frank Wilczek begins his latest book, *The Lightness of Being*, with the statement that “matter is not what it appears to be”\(^2\) given it is a double articulation that it is multilayered phenomenon and presents itself to the senses one way while presenting itself through different technological and

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mathematical mediations as something entirely different. It should be immediately apparent that it is problematic to understand matter as something that exists and behaves in a single homogeneous way.

As far as sense data is concerned, matter is “substantial, weighty, and permanent.”\(^3\) That is, normal matter is the stuff we study in chemistry, biology, and geology. It is the stuff we use to build things, and it’s what we’re made of. Normal matter is also the stuff that astronomers see in their telescopes. Planets, stars, and nebulae are made from the same stuff that we find and study here on Earth.\(^4\)

From this Newtonian vantage point, the essence of matter is its “resistance to motion, inertia or mass.”\(^5\) Following from this, mass is understood as “the ultimate property of matter.”\(^6\)

When broken down even further, it was discovered that matter is composed of more basic parts known as \textit{atoms}. Originally, atoms were understood as stable homogeneous objects that were infinitely plentiful, permeated everything and did not change or break down into smaller parts. The philosopher Lucretius captures the essence of atomism when he writes that, “nature resolves everything into its component atoms and never reduces anything to nothing.”\(^7\) With the atom, matter can no longer be understood as a solid entity. Instead, mass becomes “a property of a particle, which is a measure of its inertia.”\(^8\) In other words, matter is understood as a series of tiny atoms or particles that are each working together to contribute to the

\(^3\) Wilczek, 9
\(^4\) Ibid, 22
\(^5\) Ibid, 1
\(^6\) Ibid, 11
\(^7\) Lucretius. \textit{The Nature of the Universe}, translated by R.E. Latham, (Penguin: Harmondsworth; Middlesex, 1951), pp. 33
\(^8\) Wilczek, 233
overall inertia of the whole object. This object then presents itself to sense data as an object that is dimensional, weighty, and resistant in relative degree to different external movements. Wilczek explains this further,

mass, for Newton, is not something you should try to explain in terms of something simpler. Second: Newton ascribes the changes we observe in the world entirely to rearrangements of elementary building blocks. The building blocks themselves are neither created nor destroyed – they just move around. This understanding of matter has held its ground since at least the time of Democritus, who is credited with formulating the ideas surrounding the atom and its relation to matter.

According to Wilczek, normal matter “is not all there is in the universe.” As a matter of fact, “if you just count up mass, then normal matter is a minor impurity, contributing only 4-5% of the total.” According to Wilczek, it is believed that the remaining 95% is comprised of dark matter and dark energy.

Dark matter, according to Wilczek, went unnoticed for so long because it is “actually perfectly transparent.” He expands on the nature of dark matter when he writes that,


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9 Wilczek, 14
10 Ibid, 22
11 Ibid, 22
12 Ibid, 22
14 Wilczek, 225 & 226
Dark energy has been called “hypothetical”\textsuperscript{15} by some and is a very complex and difficult concept that entails multiple ideas that need to be understood in order for dark energy to make any sense. It does not directly relate to or enhance the clarity of the concept of matter that is being developed in this thesis. Even though it may turn out to compose 70\% of what is in existence, it will not be dealt with further.

According to Wilczek, any object $x$, is composed of two fundamental things: \textit{photons} and \textit{atoms}. Photons are the particles that make up another type of matter known as \textit{light}. This idea, given how the senses perceive light, may at first appear to be dizzyingly counterintuitive. As Wilczek explains, “there is a natural instinct to regard light as something quite different from matter, as immaterial or even spiritual. Light certainly \textit{appears} to be quite different from tangible matter”,\textsuperscript{16} but it’s not. In fact “light is another form of matter … made of particles – particles known as photons.”\textsuperscript{17}

Atoms, when broken down into their smaller constituent parts, reveal themselves to be composed of both \textit{electrons} and \textit{atomic nuclei}. Given the nuclei are contained within the atom, they are “much smaller than the atoms as a whole.”\textsuperscript{18} Despite this small size, the atomic nuclei “contain all the positive electric charge and nearly all the mass of the atom.”\textsuperscript{19} In other words, the different objects of sense data are composed of atoms, which come together to form the relative solidity of any object $x$. When broken down even further, those same atoms are composed of smaller

\textsuperscript{15} “A hypothetical energy and pressure, uniformly filling space; more general notion than a cosmological constant as its energy/pressure can vary with time.” Greene, 538
\textsuperscript{16} Wilczek, 24
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 24
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 24
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 24
parts that form their mass or resistance of the atoms and work in concert to help form
the different objects of the senses. The atomic nuclei, which are themselves the
center of different atoms, also have a center. When looked at more closely, it turns
out that not only are protons\textsuperscript{20} a part of the nuclei, but so too are neutrons.\textsuperscript{21} These
separate parts “are held together by another force, a force that is much more powerful
than the electric force [generated by the nuclei] but acts only over short distances.”\textsuperscript{22}
This takes place along with, and contributes to, the fact that “atoms are held together
by electrical attraction between the electrons and the nuclei.”\textsuperscript{23} Taken together, what
this tells us about matter is that matter presents itself to the senses in varying degrees
of solidity and stability. When the different parts are looked at more closely, it is
discovered that matter is composed of atoms and electrons. The atoms are composed
of atomic nuclei and electrons, which are further composed of protons and neutrons.
Held together by electrical force, these different parts relate to one another in such a
way that objects appear to the senses in solid, gas or liquid form.

Wilczek follows these ideas with the disclaimer that this understanding of the
physical world, although correct, is incomplete and has been out of date since “1935
or so.”\textsuperscript{24} That may be true, but the information discussed above, although incomplete
as far as new discoveries in physics are concerned, is nonetheless sufficient to use as
a means of framing the discussion of what role matter plays in Spinoza’s thought.

\textsuperscript{20} “A very stable combination of quarks and gluons. Protons and neutrons were once thought to be
fundamental particles; now we understand that they are complex objects.” Wilczek, 236
\textsuperscript{21} “A readily identifiable combination of quarks and gluons, and an important component of ordinary
matter. Individual neutrons are unstable; they decay into proton, electron, and electron antineutrino
with a lifetime of about fifteen minutes. Neutrons bound into nuclei can be stable, however.”
Wilczek, 235
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 25
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 25
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 25
After all, if this basic understanding of matter has no place within Spinoza’s thought, how is it even remotely possible to label his philosophy as a kind of materialism?

Before returning to Spinoza’s philosophy, it is necessary to summarize the information presented above. First, it is important to remember that matter is a double articulation. That is, matter is an entity that presents itself to the senses one way, while presenting itself in another way through the mediation of certain technological, experimental, and mathematical means. Also, matter is something that is composed of multiple parts that are further composed of parts that are further composed of parts. In other words, matter is an entity that does not operate in a homogeneously stable fashion. Instead, due to its complex divisibility, matter is an entity that functions in multiple ways, which work together in concert to form the objects of the senses. These objects, in conjunction with the divisibility just discussed, have mass and appear to sense data in relative states of solidity and stability. When matter is looked at utilizing different means of enhancement, it becomes clear that it is not simply confined to the seemingly well-ordered and stable world that we see before us everyday, whether that be a subway ride, a dinner at your favorite restaurant or a car exploding. Instead, matter is a collection of tiny parts, coming together en masse to form larger parts, which in turn form larger parts. And although this has been discussed and presented in a linear causal fashion, it is not to be understood as a static taxonomy. This type of object formation is held in common by all objects, and is something that is in a continual state of production regarding each particular modification, whether that be an atom, photon, or car stereo; therefore, all objects are at different levels of solidity, gaseousness, and liquidity, sometimes at
the same time. All objects are participating in, relative to one another, different states of composition, re-composition, and decomposition.

**Part II: Of the Nature and Origin Of the Mind**

*Propositions 1 & 2*

There are three main features of the attributes that have been discussed so far. The first is that they express the essence of substance or God to the intellect. Second, that the attributes are only conceptually distinct from substance or God. Lastly, that the attributes can and must be understood through themselves. With these new propositions, Spinoza further shows how an attribute functions when he outlines the two different ways that substance expresses itself to the intellect via the attributes.

The two propositions are:

**Prop. 1** – *Thought is an attribute of God, or God is a thinking thing.*

**Prop. 2** – *Extension is an attribute of God, or God is an extended thing.*

In the demonstration of the first proposition, which holds equally for the second proposition, Spinoza writes that, “singular thoughts, or this or that thought, are modes which express God’s nature in a certain and determinate way.” It is important to note that all thoughts, regardless of what they are about, are thoughts insofar as God is understood as a thinking entity. For example, if person \( x \) thinks thought \( y \), then that thought, insofar as it is an expression of the attribute of Thought, is an expression of God’s essence. Also, because of God’s immanent nature, and because nothing can exist or be expressed outside of God, all objects, regardless of their make up, in some capacity share in the attribute of Thought. Thought is both a metaphysical and an ontological fact for Spinoza. It is an undeniable and self-evident
truth that thought exists as a necessary part of reality. It is this idea, which allows Spinoza to state unequivocally “man thinks” as the second axiom of Part II. As Nadler explains, “an attribute is the most general and underlying nature of a thing. It is the thing’s principal property or, better, the nature that underlies all of its properties.” Therefore, according to Nadler, “Thought is a determinable nature of which particular thoughts or ideas are determinate expressions. Extension is a determinable nature of which particular shapes or figures are determinate expressions. To speak of the attributes of ... substance is to refer to the most general kind of thing that it is.” Thought and Extension, then, are the determining conditions for particular thoughts or bodies, which are determined modifications of Thought and Extension.

The First Definition

In the first definition Spinoza writes, “by body I understand a mode in a certain and determinate way expresses God’s essence insofar as he is considered as an extended thing.” Spinoza’s understanding of, not only different bodies, but also different objects in general, now takes on a more concrete nature. As was discussed in chapter one, different things are divisible, and, because of this divisibility, these different things or objects are confined to varying degrees of duration. Further, as modifications of God, these different objects are necessarily an expression of God’s essence, insofar as God is expressed via the attribute of Extension. For example, insofar as God is an extended thing, and therefore, an indivisible substance, each expression of substance or God, via the attribute of Extension, is a determined

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25 Nadler, 56
26 Ibid, 56
limitation or modification of God. That is, a hammer, for example, although an
object that is composed of parts, which are further composed of parts, is an
expression of substance or God, insofar as substance is an extended thing that has
been modified or composed in such a way that it takes on the shape of a hammer.
This is not to say that God is a hammer directly. God is an infinite and eternal
substance that is expressed via the attribute of Extension, which becomes modified or
composed as person x, the object hit with the hammer, and the hammer itself. It
would be a gross mischaracterization to confuse the nature of substance or God with
the nature of one of its modifications, this point cannot be stressed enough. Pierre
Bayle, in his Dictionary entry on Spinoza, greatly misunderstands this idea when he
writes that:

Observe carefully, as I have already said, that modes do nothing; and it is the
substances alone that act and are acted upon. This phrase, “the sweetness of
honey pleases the palate” is only true in so far as it signifies that extended
substance of which the honey is composed pleases the tongue. Thus, in
Spinoza’s system all those who say, “The Germans have killed ten thousand
Turks,” speak incorrectly and falsely unless they mean, “God modified into
Germans has killed God modified into ten thousand Turks,” and the same with
all the phrases by which what men do to one another are expressed. These
have no other true sense than this, “God hates himself, he asks favors of
himself and refuses them, he persecutes himself, he kills himself, he eats
himself, he slanders himself, he executes himself; and so on.” This would be
less inconceivable if Spinoza had presented God as an assemblage of distinct
parts; but he has reduced him to the most perfect simplicity, to unity of
substance, to indivisibility.

Although misguided, Bayle’s critique is a perfect example of how corporeality and
the indivisibility of substance or God have been misunderstood, by Spinoza’s
detractors and supporters alike. In order to understand why God is no more an angry

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27 Bayle, 311 & 312
German, than a dead Turk, it is imperative to understand what the differences are between *infinite* attributes and modifications and *mediate* modifications.

**Infinite and Mediate**

In order to show why it is that Bayle’s criticism and concerns are both unfounded and misleading, it must be demonstrated in more concrete terms how it is that substance or God expresses different modifications. As will become clear by the end of this section, the difference that Spinoza sees between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* is what, in part, allows him to draw a distinction between God and its modifications, or, why it is that God cannot literally be said to have killed Turks or anyone else.

According to Nadler, there are two main ways in which it can be said that God is the expressive cause that is expressed via the different attributes – they are “immediately and mediately.”28 For something to be expressed as an infinite modification it must have been “necessarily caused or entailed by the absolute nature of each attribute.”29 The infinite modifications, or, what is the same thing, modification without limit, is sustained by, and is a further expression of, the absolute nature of the attribute. Moreover, both the infinite attribute and the infinite modification “are the most universal and basic principals that govern all of the other things which belong to that aspect of the universe represented by the attribute.”30 In other words, the infinite and eternal attributes of Thought and Extension are expressed by the infinite modifications, and because they are the most basic or simple

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28 Nadler, 88
29 Ibid, 89
30 Ibid, 89
principles, they both belong to and are adhered to by everything. Or, the necessary condition for any object \( x \), is that it first participate in, and be determined by, the infinite attribute and modification. That is, if God is conceived as an extended thing, the attribute of Extension is expressed, along with the infinite modification, which are the basic principles of any object \( x \), and both shapes and explains what that object is. For example, all extended modifications take part in the fact that they are extended things, which commits them to a certain and necessary causal chain.

If Extension and Thought are two examples of what an infinite attribute is, then what is an example of an infinite modification? In discussing this feature Nadler is quick to point out the cloud of obscurity surrounding this part of Spinoza’s philosophy. As Nadler notes, “commentators have wrestled with this problem for generations, and still no consensus has emerged.”

In response to being asked to clarify this point of his thought, Spinoza responded in a letter that, an example of an infinite modification of Thought would be “absolutely infinite intellect.” Nadler offers, despite the lack of clarity, a rather plausible interpretation of what Spinoza meant when he said this. As far as Nadler is concerned, what Spinoza calls the absolutely infinite intellect is just another way of saying, “that the immediate infinite mode in Thought is God’s actual thinking of everything ... that is, ... it is, in essence, a perfect knowledge of everything.” With this, the causal structure erected by Spinoza to help explain how God is the necessary cause of all that is in existence.
begins to take more concrete shape. However, there still remains one more piece that needs to be addressed in order for this to be a completed structure.

If the infinite modification of the attribute of Thought is what Spinoza calls the absolutely infinite intellect, then what is the infinite modification of the attribute of Extension? The answer to this question is deceptively simple. The infinite modification of Extension is "motion and rest." Just like all mediate modifications of the attribute of Thought are particular instantiations of the infinite modification of thought, so too are all mediate modifications of Extension. In other words, all mediate modifications of Thought participate in, and are determined by, both the attribute of Thought and the infinite intellect. Similarly, all mediate modifications of Extension participate in, and are determined by, not only Extension, but also the infinite modification of motion and rest. Therefore, all particular ideas are a part of the attribute of Thought insofar as they are generated or expressed by the infinite intellect. All modifications participate in, or are determined by, the attribute of Extension, insofar as they are generated or expressed by motion and rest. It is for this reason that Extension is the generator or expressive cause of motion.

At the beginning of this section it was mentioned that part of what allows Spinoza to make this distinction is the division between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. In can now be clearly understood why this is the case. Both the infinite attributes and the infinite modifications are a way for Spinoza to further express *natura naturans* or naturing Nature. In other words, both the infinite attributes and modifications are the necessary condition of naturing needed for the mediate

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34 Ibid, 91 & Letter 64
modifications of Thought and Extension, which is just another way for Spinoza to express natura naturata.

Returning to Bayle’s critique, it can now be laid out in a clear sequence why it is that God, neither under the guise of being German or any other modification, can be said to be directly responsible for the death of one ant, let alone ten thousand Turks.

If we take the example of someone killing someone else, and start with the mediate modifications directly, it will be easier to unfold Spinoza’s seemingly convoluted causal reasoning. First, both the person doing the killing and the person being killed, share in, or are determined as, mediate modifications of substance. As mediate modifications, they both share in, or are determined by, the immediate attributes of Thought and Extension. This sharing in, or determination of, is further conditioned by the infinite modification of the infinite intellect, on the one hand, and the infinite unfurling of motion and rest caused by the attribute of Extension, on the other. Therefore, the two persons, both the one doing the killing and the one being killed, are mediate modifications of God and are not God properly speaking. As mediate modifications, these two people are necessarily limitations, which are subject to divisibility and duration. Not to mention, as was discussed in chapter one, there is nothing necessary regarding their existence. As has been demonstrated, God is an infinite and eternal substance that is not subject to, or conditioned by, any kind of limitation or modification. In other words, to claim, as Bayle does, that God is both a person who kills and a person who is killed, is to limit God to a particular modification and subjects God to divisibility, which is absurd. As will be discussed
in chapter four, it may be a misunderstanding akin to this one that allows commentators to reduce or limit Spinoza’s philosophy to a kind of materialism.\textsuperscript{35}

**Bodies**

Roughly halfway through the second Part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza takes the time to outline in more detail his understanding of bodies. And although he goes to great lengths to explicate how bodies function in his system, a complete overview of these ideas is unnecessary. Therefore, only the ideas that directly aid in understanding his notion of corporeality, and later his understanding of the mind–body relation, will be discussed.

In the fourth axiom Spinoza states that:

**Axiom 4** – *We feel that a certain body [our body] is affected in many different ways.*

Spinoza is most often classified historically and conceptually, along with Descartes and Leibniz as a Rationalist philosopher. That is, as a philosopher that shunned the information of the sensual in favor of the untainted realm of rational abstraction. Although there is much that justifies this reading of Spinoza’s philosophy, the explanatory rationalism discussed in chapter two, for example, it is nonetheless short sighted to argue that Spinoza completely banishes the information of the senses. This axiom is the first good place to raise this point. After all, we do not know that we are composed of a body that can be affected in a great many ways, we do not reason to this position; we feel our way to this position. Lived experience

\textsuperscript{35} God – expresses – infinite attributes (*Thought and Extension*) – expresses – infinite modifications (*infinite intellect and motion & rest*) – expresses – mediate modifications, which are the particular modifications or limitations of substance – expresses the essence of substance or God.
tells us, via sensual data, that we are composed in such a way that we can be affected by many different things in many different ways. In other words, one need not be a philosopher or scientist to understand this point regarding bodies. As an axiom, how could it function otherwise? The purpose behind drawing attention to this fact is not to argue that Spinoza is somehow not a rationalist. Instead, it is to show that, contrary to common opinion, Spinoza does not banish the information gained via the senses. Rather, much like a scientist, Spinoza realizes the shortcomings of sensual information, and so sees it as a step to, and a piece of, the larger more rational answer. That is, rather then toss sensual information away as a waste of time, Spinoza actually makes it the foundation of his axioms.

Postulates

The three postulates that will be discussed are:

Post 1 – *The human body is composed of a great many individuals of different natures, each of which is highly composite.*

Post 2 – *Some of the individuals of which the human body is composed are fluid, some soft, and others, finally are hard.*

Post 3 – *The individuals composing the human body, and consequently, the human body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways.*

Before discussing these three postulates, it is necessary to note that just because the human body is being focused on at this point, this is not to lay claim to any special privilege, or separation from the natural order for the human body. All modifications of Extension share in the same means of production. The sections on
the human body are being utilized simply because of their explanatory clarity, and for no other reason.

As worded, the first postulate may at first read as an odd statement. Human beings, at least according to common sense, are a single entity that is homogeneous and uniformly stable. Instead, Spinoza would have us believe that human beings are actually composed of a great many individuals, which are further composed of individuals, which are further composed of individuals. That is, the human body, on the one hand, presents itself, much like matter, as a weighty, dimensional thing that is solid and relatively stable. Upon closer inspection, however, it is discovered that, just like with matter, the human body is actually a composite structure that is composed of a great many different composite structures. For example, the human body is composed of a finite multiplicity of parts known as organs: the heart, the lungs, the eyes, skin etc. These parts are further composed of parts: cells, genes, blood vessels, etc. These parts are again further composed of parts: atoms, atomic nuclei, photons, electrons, etc. Each part works in concert with the other parts to shape what the human being both is and does. Moreover, each one of these extended parts participates in, or is determined by, not only the fact that it is a body, but also that that body is produced by the attribute of Extension and the infinite modification of motion and rest, which are ultimately expressions of God’s essence or existence. As can be seen, the human body is anything but a stable homogeneous entity.

With the second postulate, Spinoza further connects his ideas regarding bodies in general, and human bodies in particular, with the concept of matter. That is, the human body is not simply a solid inert mass. Instead, in addition to being a
composite of other bodies that are composites of other bodies, it is also an overall
body that has bodies of varying degrees of solidity and stability. It is a body that is
composed of multiple bodies, which are themselves different kinds of bodies that are
hard, soft, and fluid. Whether those parts are bones, blood, or the eyes, they are all
parts of the body that are composed of parts, which are further composed of parts.

In the final postulate that will be discussed, Spinoza highlights the fact that
not only is the human body an object that can be affected in a great many ways by
external bodies, but so too are the other bodies that the human body is composed of.
And so, the human body is composed of multiple bodies that are hard, soft, and fluid,
which are further composed of bodies, all of which have the potential to be affected
by external bodies in a multiplicity of ways; all of which are determined by the
attribute of Extension and are conditioned by motion and rest. In other words, a great
many other bodies can affect the human body in a great many different ways. An
external object in many ways can affect the parts of the body, which are themselves
composite bodies. A punch to the face, for example, affects not just the point of
impact, but also all the other composite bodies compelled to motion from their state
of rest, via the impact of the external body. The term external should not be read as
simply referring to any and all bodies that are separate from, or external to, the
borders of the human body. For example, the parts internal to the human body are
also external bodies relative to one another – the heart is an external body relative to
the lungs, and the cells of the different organs are external to other cells in other
organs, etc. With this, it can be understood why external relations are relative insofar
as even within the seemingly internal, there is also an external to the internal and vice
versa. Following from this Spinoza is able to state “from what has already been said
... it is clear to anyone that the various affects can be compounded with one another
in so many ways, and that so many variations can arise from this composition that
they cannot be defined by any number.” In other words,

no one has yet determined what the body can do, that is, experience has not
yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone, insofar
as Nature is only considered to be corporeal. For no one has yet come to
know the structure of the body so accurately that he could explain all its
functions – not to mention that many things are observed in the lower animals
which far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many
things in their sleep which they would not dare awake. This shows well
enough that the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do
many things which its mind wonders at.

In this sense, Deleuze is right in commenting that, “the capacity to be affected
remains constant, whatever the relative proportion of active and passive affections.
And so we arrive at the following conjecture: that the proportion of active and passive
feelings is open to variation, within a fixed capacity of being affected.” Therefore,
“a horse, a fish, a man, or even two men compared one with the other, do not have the
same capacity to be affected: they are not affected by the same things, or not affected
by the same things in the same way.”

Proposition 7

There are no statements in Spinoza’s system that can be said to stand over, or hold
more importance than any other statements. Nonetheless, this proposition is very
important and holds within in it vast implications for how Spinoza’s system
functions. Perhaps most importantly this proposition holds within itself the

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36 3p, p2, Schol.
37 Deleuze, 222
38 Ibid, 217
information needed to start understanding Spinoza’s so-called parallelism doctrine.

The seventh proposition states:

**Prop. 7 – The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.**

As far as Spinoza is concerned, substance or God is the absolutely infinite and eternal cause of all that is the case. This is important because, as far as Spinoza is concerned, “the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance.” That is, if substance is the cause of all that exits, if substance expresses the mediate modifications via the infinite attributes and modifications, and if all things exist in substance, it is necessary that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things. The attributes of Thought and Extension are simply two different ways that substance or God expresses itself to the intellect. As Spinoza states, “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, that is, that the same things follow one another.”

Attaching this to the information discussed so far, Spinoza’s causal reasoning can be laid out as such: substance is the cause of all that is the case. All that is the case is expressed by substance via its infinite attributes, two of which are Thought and Extension. These two attributes are infinite and can be understood through themselves. The attributes allow for the expression of the infinite modifications known as the infinite intellect, and motion and rest. This causal process is what

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39 2p, p7, Schol.
40 2p, p7, Schol.
generates the mediate modifications, and is the same for all of them, because the same thing, substance or God, caused them all. Or, as Hampshire explains it,

he is asserting that, since there are both extended things and ideas of extended things, as Nature presents itself to us, and since both the extended things and the ideas must belong to the unique self-determining substance, there can be no ideas which are not ideas of extended things, or extended things of which there is no idea.\(^41\)

This part of Spinoza's philosophy has come to be known as his doctrine of parallelism.

**Parallelism**

In discussing this part of Spinoza's philosophy, Bennett comments that "parallelism asserts a mapping of physical facts onto mental facts – it says that for every true physical proposition there is a corresponding true mental one, and vice versa."\(^42\)

Although what Bennett states is not entirely incorrect, the language that he uses is slightly problematic and possibly misleading.

First, what Bennett gets right is that for every physical fact or extended mediate modification there is a mental fact or a mediate thought modification. That is, regardless of what it is, because it is a modification of the unique causal substance, and substance is by nature comprehensible, it is possible to think about or form ideas on any modification of substance. Where Bennett is possibly misleading is in his use of the word *mapping*. The use of the term seems to imply a point for point correspondence between what is thought about the object, what is said about the object, and what the object actually is. This is accurate insofar as, for Spinoza, to

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\(^41\) Ibid, 59  
\(^42\) Bennett, 142
think and say that dogs can bark, it is necessary that dogs bark. Although, this idea seems to confuse thoughts with bodies, insofar as thoughts and bodies are to be understood through their respective attributes. And so, thoughts and bodies are somehow different from one another and cannot be understood in terms of one another. Thoughts and bodies are not to be confused as the same thing. After all, thoughts can have no causal impact on extended things and vice versa. For example, there is something different regarding the act of thinking about a spoon and the actual spoon. It is no more plausible to think a spoon into existence than it is to eat thoughts with a spoon. Thoughts and bodies are the same insofar as the same unique substance causes them. After that, they are to be understood in themselves. In other words, Thought is not reducible to Extension and vice versa. Yet, at the same time, thoughts and bodies do correspond with one another insofar as the same substance causes them. Or, as Spinoza explains,

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 the other attributes

Parallelism should also be understood as a logical consequence of Spinoza’s naturalism and his understanding that all modifications, whether of a mental or physical nature, draw equally from the same source for their existence. For Spinoza, all things play by the same rules or are conditioned by the same set of natural laws insofar as God causes them. Nothing stands outside of the causal nexus that is substance in action, not even substance or God.

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43 2p, p7, Schol.
Applying this idea to the division between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* helps render these concepts into more concrete terms. Despite being separate from one another, these two concepts nonetheless run in parallel with one another. To understand substance via these two concepts is to discuss the exact same substance. They are orders of connection that run in parallel with one another, the one not negating the other insofar as they are expressing one and the same univocal substance.

**Mind and Body**

**Prop 13** – *The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else.*

This is the beginning of Spinoza trying to solve the issue of how the mind interacts with the body, a problem inherited from Descartes. The problem is: *if a thought is an immaterial substance, and if a body is a material substance, how is it possible for an immaterial substance to affect a material substance?* Descartes’ answer to this problem was the pineal gland.

Spinoza’s answer is the same answer that he uses to explain how two attributes are caused by substance. The mind and the body are simply two different ways to investigate or understand the same thing: *substance*. Or, as Spinoza explains it, “the mind and the body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension.”

Given the tendency of many commentators to label Spinoza a materialist, it may be tempting to label his understanding of the mind/body interaction as an

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44 3p, p2, Schol.
example of epiphenomenalism. Although tempting, such a label would be a miscalculation of what he tries to argue for. Although the mind is the idea of the body, this is not to argue that the body somehow produces it. Spinoza strictly forbids such causal interaction. The mind and its ideas derive their existence not from the body, but rather from the attribute of Thought. What then does it mean to state that the mind is the idea of the body?

The mind, in common everyday usage, is normally understood as somehow immaterial, separate from the body, and the causal nexus for willful actions. This common sense understanding is a crass reformulation of the mind/body problem of Descartes. It is an understanding of the mind and its interaction with the body that allows for the belief that the mind is somehow able to not only control the body, but also separate itself from the body through an act of will. This common sense understanding is epitomized in the idiom of ‘mind over matter.’ Such an understanding of the mind’s interaction with the body uncritically retains Descartes’ dualism.

In response to this, Spinoza argues that the mind is not an immaterial realm that is somehow separate from, but still able to control, the body. In a way, as far as Spinoza is concerned, the relationship between the mind and the body is not that mysterious. Given the affective composition of the body, our mental contents are not the result of some seemingly magical process. Instead, the mind comes to be based on the activities and engagements of the physical body, in a physical world, in concrete situations. All of the different physical states of the body are also registered in different ideas that correspond with the physical states. For example, when a
person touches any object $x$, the different bodies that compose the body are compelled to motion, setting off an affective chain of events that is registered, not only by the body, but by thought as well. And so, the object of a person’s mind is any object $x$, that has in some way had an affective impact on the body. Understood in this way, the mind is nothing more than the affective potential of the body expressed in ideas. It is for this reason that any physical manifestation is, on the one hand, explainable through Extension, while, on the other, they are also explainable through Thought.

In discussing Spinoza’s novel solution to the mind/body problem, Antonio Damasio, explains that the Cartesian understanding of the mind/body problem “splits the mind to one side and the body and its brain to the other.” For Damasio, this idea is a radical simplification of a much more complex issue that when properly addressed looks something like this:

it requires an understanding that the mind arises from or in a brain situated within a body-proper with which it interacts; that due to mediation of the brain, the mind is grounded in the body proper; that the mind has prevailed in evolution because it helps maintain the body-proper; and that the mind arises from or in biological tissue – nerve cells – that share the same characteristics that define other living tissues in the body-proper. Although Spinoza did not have access to the same neurological understanding of the brain and its relation to the ‘body-proper’, he nonetheless provides the philosophical structure for the interaction of mind and body that Damasio puts forward. According to Damasio, Spinoza’s answer to the mind/body problem is nothing short of a “real breakthrough.” Damasio further explains that,

46 Ibid, 191
47 Ibid, 211
Spinoza is not merely saying that mind springs fully formed from substance on equal footing with body. He is assuming a mechanism whereby the equal footing can be realized. The mechanism has a strategy: Events in the body are represented as ideas in the mind. There are representational “correspondences,” and they go in one direction – from body to mind.\footnote{Ibid, 212}

Damasio updates this understanding when he states that, “the body and the brain form an integrated organism and interact fully and mutually via chemical and neural pathways.”\footnote{Ibid, 194}

Or, put another way, “our mind is made of images of one’s body is equivalent to saying that our mind is made up of images, representations, or thoughts of our own parts of our own body in spontaneous action or in the process of modifications caused by the environment.”\footnote{213 & 214}

With what has been discussed, it is now possible to answer the first question asked at the start of this chapter: How does corporeality function in Spinoza’s philosophy?

Starting with the concept of matter discussed above, the easy answer to this question is that matter functions in Spinoza’s philosophy in very much the same way as it does in the Natural sciences. This is to understand matter as an observable phenomenon that is composed of parts that in some way compose the world around us. This should come as no real surprise given Spinoza’s long held interest in the natural sciences and his strict adherence to naturalism.

The more difficult way to answer this question is to say that, despite his allowance into his philosophy of materiality, his philosophy is not to be committed to
materialism in any of its forms. After all, substance or God is not divisible.

Therefore, any understanding of matter that is composed of parts and divisible exists solely at the level of the mediate modifications. In order for substance to be substance and attributes to be attributes, they cannot in anyway be understood as divisible. And so, it can be said that every thing exists in God and God exists in everything, but not that everything is God.
Chapter Four

“It is hard to see how any philosopher could give a greater priority to knowledge of the body than Spinoza has”

- Edwin Curley
Chapter Four

In the preceding chapters the attributes have been singled out as one particular area of Spinoza’s philosophy, which lends itself to a high level of controversy. In light of this, the attributes have been slowly developed in an attempt to have as strong an understanding of them and their implications as is possible. It is now appropriate to begin exploring what the problem with the attributes is, and how this problem is to be solved. In order for this to happen, chapter four will start by reviewing what the problem with the attributes is, and why they have stirred up so much dust in the secondary literature. In an attempt to solve the problem of the attributes, this thesis will look at two attempts, by Bennett and Deleuze respectively, that address this problem. Following this, this thesis will propose an answer that both borrows and diverges from these secondary sources.

The second half of this chapter will take up Stuart Hampshire and Edwin Curley’s attempts to read Spinoza as a materialist, and the arguments that they formulate to support such a reading. These arguments will be taken from Hampshire’s A Kind of Materialism and Curley’s Behind the Geometric Method. Following this, there will be a proposed counter-argument against both Hampshire’s and Curley’s arguments. The proposed counter argument to Hampshire and Curley’s readings will argue that they misunderstand Spinoza’s concept of substance or God, and falsely reduce or limit God to a particular modification that does not fit the definitions and the implications of those definitions.
The Problem of the Attributes

According to Warren Kessler, the problem of the attributes divides commentators on Spinoza's philosophy into two 'camps'. On the one hand, there are those who read the attributes as subjective properties of the mind, which are formed to understand existence. As Kessler writes, "subjectivists hold that the attributes are merely inventions of the human intellect which we ascribe to substance as if they constitute its essence, although our ideas of the attributes do not conform to the actual nature of substance."¹ Two important words to pay attention to are 'as if', which directly imply that the attributes are to be understood as a kind of educated flight of fancy. Or, to be more charitable, when understood in this way, the attributes have no existence outside of being a product of mental activity. Moreover, the statement that the attributes do not directly 'conform' to substance further establishes the attributes as cognitively formed to explain things, but this does not guarantee that they necessarily conform to substance. Given Spinoza's firm insistence that substance or God is transparent in its activities, the flaws of this reading can already be seen. On the other hand, there is the objectivist reading, which argues that the attributes do have an existence that extends beyond what is said or thought subjectively regarding the attributes. As Kessler writes, "objectivists maintain that the attributes in fact constitute the essence of substance and that our ideas of these attributes comprise an adequate knowledge of that essence."² The objectivist reading then wants to affirm not only the existence of the attributes, but also to argue that the attributes are necessarily objective and have an existence separate from the intellect.

¹ Warren Kessler. A Note on Spinoza's Concept of Attribute in Spinoza, edited by Eugene Freeman and Maurice Mandelbaum, (Open Court: LaSalle, 1975), pp. 191
² Ibid, 191
Pierre Macherey, in discussing Hegel’s critique of Spinoza, does an excellent job outlining the subjectivist position in more detail. Hegel’s understanding of the attributes, as conceptualized by Macherey, unintentionally lends a level of subtlety and validity to the subjectivist reading that it might otherwise not have.

According to Macherey, Hegel takes issue with the way that substance interacts with or relates to the attributes. As Macherey writes, for Hegel “the attributes, as Spinoza defines them, are ... abstract essences, points of view on substance, which remain external to substance and as a result only “represent” it in an incomplete manner.”

It is because of this that Spinoza, as far as Hegel is concerned, “remains foreign to the idealist perspective, because he denies thought the character of a substance.” The reason behind this separation extends not only from Spinoza denying Thought the status of a substance, but, moreover

if ... thought is an attribute, which the Spinozist system undeniably asserts, and if the attributes occupy a subordinate position in relation to substance, which confers on them diminished, or incomplete, functions, thought is no longer that absolute process that affirms its necessity by realizing it. Rather, thought is only an aspect or a moment of that process, which does not have all its conditions in itself, and whose development is, if one considers it in itself, contingent insofar as it depends on an external cause

Both Hegel’s critique and the subjective interpretation both rest their readings upon a mischaracterization of the way substance relates to, or interacts with, the attributes.

As has already been discussed, understanding the attributes as somehow secondary to, or contingent upon substance, that is, in a role of inferiority, is deeply problematic. In the end, the very reason that Hegel finds the attributes problematic is the same reason

4 Ibid, 66, 5
5 Ibid, 66, 5
that some have called them subjective states instead of objective facts. Read in this way the attributes are nothing more than a highly developed cognitive fiction and, as will be discussed later, the subjectivist reading is problematic for these same reasons.

Bennett: How Many Attributes?

Although it is clear that Spinoza allows for two different attributes of substance, the question still has to be asked, is that all there is? Or does Spinoza allow for more than two attributes. If this is the case, then how is this possible?

In an attempt to answer and clarify this point Bennett argues that it makes no sense reading Spinoza as having forwarded a philosophy that allows for multiple attributes beyond the two mentioned. According to Bennett, Spinoza’s “dualism is assumed rather than defended.” Using this notion as the foundation for his argument, Bennett states that just because Spinoza writes that God has infinite attributes, this does not mean that, “God has all the attributes.” Instead, as far as Bennett is concerned, Spinoza’s God is complete insofar as it is understood as having the attributes of Thought and Extension. After all, according to Bennett, Spinoza “does not think that we have concepts of any attributes other than the famous two.”

This reading is appealing for many reasons, not least of which is its explanatory cleanliness, which results from its being able to limit Spinoza’s God to a concept dualism. This concept dualism arguably allows for a much smoother and organized reading of Spinoza’s philosophy. However, it remains false that Spinoza would have us believe that we cannot form some kind of concept of God’s other

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6 Bennett, 49
7 Ibid, 75
8 Ibid, 48
attributes. If substance is the causal nexus for everything, and, if substance is completely transparent, (not to mention that the order and connection of causes is the same for all attributes), does this not present us with a starting point, (if nothing else), for understanding the other attributes? Moreover, to limit substance’s attributive nature simply to two is neither allowed nor encouraged by Spinoza. Two times in this thesis Spinoza has already been quoted as saying that there are other attributes beyond the two mentioned. For example, in chapter three, Spinoza was quoted as stating how substance or God can be understood not only through both attributes, but also “under any other attribute.”

This detail is overlooked or undervalued by both Hampshire and Curley and will prove important later. Further, Spinoza is clear that the attributes and substance are not confined to Thought and Extension alone. To limit substance and by proxy, the attributes to only two, is to stifle or restrict the causal power of substance. Substance or God is the infinite cause of all that is the case, and therefore, cannot be limited to only two attributes. To answer our question we can say that the attributes, as far as Spinoza is concerned, are without limit. In other words, the attributes are infinite in kind and productive potential or, substance is absolutely infinite. Or, as Deleuze rightly states,

we know only two attributes and yet we know there is an infinity of them. We know only two because we can only conceive as infinite those qualities that we involve in our essence: thought and extension, inasmuch as we are mind and body. But we know that there is an infinity of attributes because God has an absolutely infinite power of existing, which cannot be exhausted either by thought or by extension

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9 2p, p7
Despite this disagreement on the number of attributes, Bennett never loosens sight of the fact that for Spinoza the attributes were objective properties of existence. As Bennett concretely states, “an attribute for Spinoza is a basic way of being”\(^{11}\), or, attributes are “basic and irreducible way of being or most general property”\(^{12}\) which cannot be explained via the subjective states of the modifications.

**Deleuze: Subjective?**

Deleuze’s reading of the attributes, much like Bennett’s, is flawed in a productive way. There are things that are rather useful in how Deleuze explains the role and function of the attributes. However, there is also much in Deleuze’s reading that seems to be caught in some of the subjectivist traps. Given this ensnarement, at times Deleuze fails to fully appreciate the relationship between substance and its attributes. Because of the *seemingly* incompatible relationship between the subjective and objective approaches, does Deleuze’s discussion on the attributes therefore only yield ideas that are useful for a subjective approach? Or, does he manage to negotiate a position between the two readings, never fully committing to one side over the other?

At the very beginning of Deleuze’s chapter on the attributes in his text *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, he makes a statement that would appear to fall on the subjective side of the divide. The first line reads as follows, “Spinoza doesn’t say that attributes exist of themselves.”\(^{13}\) Later in the paragraph, Deleuze adds to this statement when he writes that, “nor again does he say that an attribute is in itself and

\(^{11}\) Bennett, 61  
\(^{12}\) Ibid, 61  
\(^{13}\) Deleuze, 41
conceived through itself, like substance." These statements stand in stark contrast to those that he makes elsewhere regarding the attributes. For example, in his text *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, he begins his definition of the attributes by stating that

the attributes are not ways of seeing pertaining to the intellect, because the Spinozist intellect perceives what is; they are not emanations either, because there is no superiority, no eminence of substance over the attributes, nor of one attribute over another.

These two readings are clearly incompatible with one another. This is evident as soon as they are seen side by side. The first statement firmly supports the subjectivist reading of the attributes. If Hegel's critique is remembered, one of the reasons he thinks Spinoza's attributes are problematic is because they are subordinate to substance. In playing second fiddle to substance, the attributes, like Hegel and the subjectivist reading would have them be, become nothing more than viewpoints on substance and not substance properly speaking. Deleuze's initial statement only supports this reading by denying that the attributes can be understood through themselves like substance, which, as Hegel rightly points out, makes the attributes both separate from and outside of substance. This stands in contrast to the second statement, which appears to contradict or replace the first. The attributes are no longer just points of view on substance but instead, they are substance understood via an attribute that must be understood through itself. Are the attributes then, to be understood as a subjective viewpoint or as an objective fact of existence? Deleuze never directly addresses this question. In light of this fact, it is hard to say whether or

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14 Ibid, 41
15 Deleuze (1988), 51
not Deleuze is to be read as affirming one position over another. His reading, if understood in this way, keeps the question of the subjective and objective readings in a kind of conceptual limbo or ambiguity.

Regardless of whether or not Deleuze understands the attributes as subjective or objective, it does not change the fact that Deleuze does offer some interesting insights into how substance and the attributes relate to one another via the intellect. According to Deleuze,

if the attribute necessarily relates to the intellect, this is not because it resides in the intellect, but because it is expressive and because what it expresses necessarily implies an intellect that "perceives" it. The essence that is expressed is an unlimited, infinite quality. The expressive attribute relates essence to substance and it is this immanent relation that the intellect grasps. All the essences, distinct in the attributes, are as one in substance, to which they are related by the attributes\(^{16}\)

In other words, the attributes do not exist in the intellect itself. They are not a product of the intellect. Instead, the expressive nature of the attributes presupposes an intellect that is able to perceive the attributes. This understanding of the intellect’s relationship to the attributes excludes the possibility of the attributes existing in the intellect alone. The attributes are infinitely expressive because, as has already been discussed, they are substance expressing itself via the attributes of Thought and Extension.

It is now possible to return to Hegel’s reading of the attributes and why it is that the subjectivist reading is no more accurate than Hegel’s.

As far as Hegel understands the attributes, they are separate from and contingent upon substance for their existence. Because they exist outside of

\(^{16}\) Deleuze (1988), 51
substance as points of view, they necessarily exist in the intellect or are a subjective way to understand the objectivity of substance. As points of view that are external to substance the attributes, given their subjective quality, are incomplete or confused and are unable to render or understand substance in any objective way. The reasons why this reading is problematic can be summarized as follows. First, substance is the reason that everything exists. As such, everything exists in substance. Therefore it would not be possible for something to exist outside of substance. Second, the attributes can and must be understood through themselves and cannot be understood as somehow being responsible for an incomplete or confused vantage point on substance. After all, substance is transparent, and, because the attributes express the essence of substance, they are necessarily an objective viewpoint on substance. They are able to express the essence of substance because they are substance understood from the point of view of the attributes.

With what has been said, it may at first seem that the subjectivist reading of the attributes has nothing to offer. Seemingly it has been refuted and shown to lead to conceptual confusion but this is not all that the subjectivist reading has to offer. The subjectivist reading does draw attention to the role that affective bodily relations have for Spinoza. After all, according to Spinoza the body is a composite structure that can be affected by its’ own body as well as other bodies in a multiplicity of different ways. And, because the bodies that affect other bodies are an expression of substance via the attributes, subjectivity necessarily plays some kind of a role. Nowhere does Spinoza deny the role that subjectivity has in understanding the attributes. Instead, what Spinoza denies is that a purely subjective approach will lead to an adequate
understanding of substance or God. The answer to the problem of the attributes can then be said to exist somewhere in the middle or in-between the two poles. That is, the objective reading is correct insofar as the attributes are objective states of existence that necessarily exist. The subjective reading is correct insofar as the attributes are causally affective; they also necessarily have a subjective impact. No two people are going to be affected by one and the same object in one and the same way. In the end however, neither position can be said to stand in complete dominance over the other. The reason is simple, substance, understood as substance, is non-relational. So logic (and any kind of binary thought process for that matter) is itself only a further step towards understanding substance or God, and not an end in itself.

**Materialism: Hampshire and Curley**

Both Stuart Hampshire and Edwin Curley rely heavily upon Spinoza’s understanding of the mind’s interaction with the body when reading his philosophy materialistically. Hampshire, on the one hand, does not construct an argument for Spinoza’s materialism as much as he simply assumes its validity and contrasts it with what he calls ‘crass’ materialism. Curley on the other hand, instead of simply stating that Spinoza is a materialist, does try through the mind/body interaction, to explain why he is and should be read as a materialist. Once again, the argument that will be constructed in counter distinction does not rest upon refuting their readings directly. Instead, it will be argued that they do not misunderstand the mind/body interaction. Rather, what they misunderstand is Spinoza’s understanding of substance or God and that the conclusions of the mind’s interaction with the body are not completely
transferable to substance or God. In other words, it will be argued that reading
Spinoza as a materialist is to limit or reduce the causal power of substance or God. In
other words, to read Spinoza as a materialist is to confuse the nature of substance or
God with the nature of its modifications.

**Hampshire: A Kind of Materialism**

In discussing Spinoza’s materialism, Hampshire contrasts what he calls Spinoza’s
“self-conscious materialism”\(^\text{17}\) with what he refers to as “crass”\(^\text{18}\) or “classical”\(^\text{19}\) materialism. In so doing Hampshire freely admits that what he proposes as Spinoza’s
materialism might not actually seem like materialism at all. As he writes, “you will
perhaps say that this is a very peculiar kind of materialism – scarcely materialism at
all.”\(^\text{20}\) Despite this, Hampshire nonetheless feels that Spinoza is and should be read
as a materialist for the simple reason that the classic materialism of Lucretius,
Hobbes, Epicurus, and others, was at a time useful but is now in light of Spinoza’s
understanding of the mind/body relationship, out-of-date.

In order to better understand why Spinoza’s should be understood as a
superior kind of materialism, it is first helpful to look at the classical understanding
and see what it lacked as far as Hampshire is concerned.

Classical materialists failed because they “could not bring themselves
consistently to view human beings solely as one kind of natural object among
others.”\(^\text{21}\) There is a whole host of reasons as to why this was the case, political,

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\(^{18}\) Ibid, 12
\(^{19}\) Ibid, 10
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 19
\(^{21}\) Ibid, 6
religious, moral. In other words, the classical type of materialism “always kept some powers of mind in reserve, treating these superior powers of thought as if they transcended the natural order.” A perfect example of this would be the Stoics and their belief that the human, despite living in a physically determined world, is nonetheless able to impose its free will and control its emotional engagement with the world. This results in the false belief that our cognitive faculties somehow constitute a *kingdom within a kingdom* that is further unable to be touched by or conditioned as a function of the natural world. This kind of understanding refuses to acknowledge the natural character of not only the human, but also the thinking of the human as well. In short, classical materialism lacks a certain level of self-reflexivity and is unwilling to subject mental cognition to the same scrutiny as the physical world. This allows free will to be retained as well as the ability to keep the human above the natural environment that they find themselves existing in. As previously demonstrated, Spinoza refuses under any circumstances, to allow for the human being (or any other kind of being for that matter) to be understood outside the natural order. It is because of this that he refuses to accept the belief, still falsely held even today, that the human being is above, better, or different from any other physical object or animal in the known world. This is a result of Spinoza’s uncompromising naturalism and the reason why Hampshire feels that Spinoza’s materialism should be called a ‘self-conscious’ type of materialism. As should be evident, the reason for this not only stems from Spinoza’s naturalism but also from his understanding of how the mind interacts with the body. This also has a deeply felt ethical component.

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22 Ibid, 6
Expanding upon this, Hampshire writes that Spinoza was “determined to be entirely consistent in his naturalism in the sense that he will not admit any discontinuity in principles of explanation.”23 As previously mentioned, because of Spinoza’s naturalism, all things that exist, whether of a physical or mental kind, are subject to the same rules of formation and laws of determination. In other words, the order and connection of physical objects and mental content is the same. The classical materialists strayed from this idea and in doing so did not follow “through to the end the implications of their theses.”24 In not following through with their ideas, they were unable to ask a profoundly necessary and ethical question. That is, classical materialists “have not persistently asked themselves what it would be like actually to be a materialist.”25 In other words, what would happen if the same means of investigating the physical world were turned back onto the human being? What would happen to our understanding of what it means to live the ethical and good life? According to Hampshire, it is because of this refusal, that so many for so long have “omit[ted] themselves … from the picture that they give of the mind/body relation.”26

Spinoza does not succumb to such appeals to tradition. Instead, he breaks with previous understandings of the mind/body relation and, in so doing, is able to move back and forth between “persons as active observers of the physical world to the considerations of them as also observed objects, with their bodies in a dual role, as both purposefully used instruments of exploration and also as observed objects.”27

23 Ibid, 7
24 Ibid, 7
25 Ibid, 8
26 Ibid, 8
27 Ibid, 8
As mentioned in chapter three, the physical body, in a physical world and in concrete situations, is what gives rise to the mind being the idea of the body. Or as Hampshire phrases it, Spinoza insists “on the dependence ... of a man’s interests and purposes upon his knowledge of his situation, and of his knowledge of his situation upon his interests and purposes.” 28 It is also this understanding that allows Spinoza to construct “a more inclusive, and less egocentric, model of the natural order, which includes the observer.” 29

In discussing the role of thinking and thought within Spinoza’s understanding of the natural order Hampshire argues that, “all thought ... is to be thought of as a kind of perception. The difference between different kinds of thought is a difference in the nature of the physical transactions involved.” 30 In other words, given that the body is a naturally occurring object, which exists in the natural order, it makes little sense to explain the thinking process of different people using the ideas of an immaterial substance, like Descartes, that is somehow free to decide and control the body. Instead, the mental contents of any given person are not determined by a cosmic act of free will, but rather by the concrete environment of the actually existing body. It is because of this, according to Hampshire, that Spinoza, via his understanding of the mind/body relation, is able to explain “his changing beliefs, desires and sentiments, and changes in direction, or topic, of his thought, as associated with changes in just one physical object, his body.” 31 Tying this back into the ethical implications briefly mentioned above, Hampshire goes on to argue that the
ethicist is able to change “someone’s thoughts and sentiments by [their] arguments, there will be associated bodily changes also.”

Although a detailed discussion of Spinoza’s ethical philosophy is beyond the scope of this thesis, with what has been said it is easily apprehended how, through his understanding of the mind/body relation, Spinoza is able to construct an ethical framework that is built entirely around the idea of bodily affectivity. That is, given the composite nature of bodies and the affective potential contained therein, a naturalized ethics built around Spinoza’s metaphysics would necessarily be an ethics of affectivity. An ethical understanding arises not from a fixed transcendent realm that cannot be reached via physical means but rather by the physical way that bodies interact and affect one another. An earthquake for example, is no longer understood as a sign that God is angry. Instead, through a naturalized understanding of God, the earthquake comes to be understood as a fundamentally natural occurrence that takes place based on naturally occurring laws and not as the emotional whim of a Judeo-Christian God. Hampshire is right then in seeing this understanding as an ethical shift in paradigms.

As far as Hampshire is concerned, it is the responsibility of materialism “to assert a much closer relation between processes of thought and physical processes than is implied in most of the idioms of ordinary speech.” It is with this idea in mind that he argues that Spinoza is a “genuine materialist in the narrow sense that he asserts that every change in the state of the organism, which is a change in thought, is

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32 Ibid, 18
33 Ibid, 18
also a change in some bodily state.”

It is important to note that Hampshire qualifies his labeling of Spinoza’s materialism with the words ‘narrow sense’.

**Curley: Behind the Geometric Method**

In *Behind the Geometric Method*, Curley argues against Bennett’s reading of the attributes as a concept dualism, commenting that the approach of a concept dualism seems “profoundly mistaken.” Instead, Curley argues that it makes more sense to understand Spinoza as a materialist. That is, the mind and the body are not to be understood as two separate concepts but rather, the mind is explainable based on physical or bodily occurrences. Curley begins his argument by making reference to the mind/body relation. According to Curley, if the mind is the idea of the body then “it is of the essence of the human mind to be related to something else, specifically, something else which exists.” In other words, just like the attributes presuppose the intellect, the mind presupposes the body. Therefore without “an actually existing human body” there is no mind. Extending itself from this, in order to understand why someone thinks the way they do, it is necessary to understand the objects that they surround themselves with, regardless of whether those objects are other people or trees. In other words, humans exist in an environment of other objects that have a direct and immediate affect on them. Understanding how these different objects affect different parts of their body allows people to understand themselves better.

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34 Ibid, 18
36 Ibid, 74
37 Ibid, 75
is because of this that “these various capacities of the human body to affect and be affected are rigorously correlated with the capacities to know.”

In asserting that the mind is the idea of the body and how other bodies affect that body, a person can be thought to firstly know their own body. From a naturalized understanding of the mind/body relation this makes perfect sense because, as understood by Spinoza, the body is the only contact that we have with objects. Or, what people know about the world comes via their body’s affectivity.

Curley continues his understanding of the mind/body relation by pointing out an epistemologically interesting consequence of Spinoza’s philosophy: “if the mind’s knowledge of external bodies, and of itself, is inadequate and confused, this is fundamentally because its knowledge of the parts of its own body is inadequate and confused.” In other words, when someone does not understand something about or relating to some object, there is nothing wrong with the object that someone is confused about. The object is what it is and nothing more. The mind of the person is confused which requires a shift in its bodily perspective. The bodily understanding is twisted and confused resulting in a twisted and confused understanding of the object.

It can now be better understood why Curley rejects Bennett’s concept of dualism. If Curley is right and the mind is best understood as arising from and sustaining its existence upon other bodies, then the split that Bennett tries to retain through the dualism simply evaporates. As Curley argues, “to understand the mind, we must understand the body, without which the mind could not function or even

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38 Ibid, 77
39 Ibid, 77
exist. In spite of all the parallelistic talk, the order of understanding never proceeds from mind to body.\textsuperscript{40}

Is Spinoza a materialist? As mentioned previously, both Hampshire and Curley cannot be said to have misunderstood Spinoza’s doctrine of the mind’s interaction with the body. They have both demonstrated a good grasp of how Spinoza understands this complex relationship and both their readings help to not only heighten our understanding but also help to clarify a very difficult part of Spinoza’s philosophy. Their mutual misunderstanding of Spinoza, then, does not rest with their understanding of the mind/body relation. Instead, what they fail to understand is how substance or God interacts with or is related to the attributes and how those attributes express God’s essence. In other words, much like Bayle, who misunderstood Spinoza’s God, allowing him to draw the erroneous inference that God can be said to act upon itself, thus being held responsible for killing itself, along with many other things. This misunderstanding permeates Hampshire and Curley’s understandings as well. To better understand why this is so, it is necessary to revisit how it is that substance or God functions.

God is an infinite and eternal substance that is the necessary cause for all that is the case - a cause that when understood from the vantage point of God is necessarily non-relational. In being the cause for all that is the case, God expresses itself through its attributes, which are necessarily infinite in existence and number. Two of which are Thought and Extension. Both Thought and Extension are equal and necessary parts of reality that are not in any way reducible to one another.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 78
Although Extension is an attribute of God this is not to claim that God is divisible. Where Hampshire, Curley and others have misunderstood what Spinoza is trying to argue for is in their confusion regarding the difference between the attributes and mediate modifications. As already discussed, corporeality is a part of God, insofar as God expresses itself via different attributes. This is not to claim that God can be identified solely through one of its attributes alone. With the concept of matter discussed in chapter three, it was demonstrated that matter is not only composed of parts, but also divisible and finite. None of this is true of God. Moreover, divisibility exists not at the level of God or its attributes, which are equally indivisible, but rather at the level of the mediate modifications which when understood as God, are once again not divisible. Curley in particular seems to forward a kind of epiphenomenalism regarding how the mind interacts with the body that would make the mind a product of the body. This is simply not the case given that the mind is generated and sustained, not by the body, which is a product of Extension, but by the attribute of Thought. In reading Spinoza as a materialist, Hampshire, Curley and others, rather then understanding the mind/body relationship through God, try to understand God through the mind/body relationship. What this ends up doing is prioritizing not only Extension over Thought, which is not allowed by Spinoza, but also one facet of the modifications over another, which is equally not allowed by Spinoza. In the end, Spinoza is no more a materialist then he is an atheist.
Conclusion

“I attribute to Nature neither beauty nor ugliness, neither order nor confusion. For things can only be called beautiful or ugly, orderly or confused, in relation to our imagination”

- Spinoza (Letter 32)

“If one tethers one’s heart severely and imprisons it, one can give one’s spirit many liberties: I have said that once before. But one does not believe me, unless one already knows it”

- Friedrich Nietzsche
Conclusion

On page four in the first chapter it was asked what the practical impacts are in accepting or rejecting Spinoza’s claims regarding the existence of God. In other words, what difference would it make whether or not one believed in Spinoza’s God? At the time it was only possible to state the question. Now, with what has been demonstrated in this thesis it is possible to show what kind of an impact Spinoza’s God has on a person’s lived or practical reality. For example, does an immanent God necessarily undermine a moral worldview or the possibility for moral values as some have suggested?

The first, and perhaps greatest impact is that things and events can no longer be explained utilizing a supernatural or transcendent principle. Gone then is the ability to explain something as having resulted from a miraculous or transcendent origin. Miracles are no longer an acceptable means of explanation because it breaks with both Spinoza’s naturalistic understanding of God and God’s immanent nature. As mentioned, nothing, not even God, can be understood as somehow existing outside of the natural world or universe. Miracles are natural occurrences that lack a proper understanding and not proof of God’s ability to suspend the laws of physics. When properly understood the laws of the universe are God’s laws. The Bible, for example, under such rigid naturalistic tethering, becomes a historical document that was written by humans, for humans, in order to fulfill human needs. Given there is no longer room for a transcendent realm or a supernatural origin, the Bible is no more literally the Word of God than a restaurant menu is.
The second major impact that an immanent understanding of God has is immediately tied to the first. Since Spinoza denies a supernatural or transcendent realm, and given that no occurrence can be explained as miraculous, then all phenomena have a naturalistic explanation. Consequently, all acts of God are no longer rooted in emotional and transcendent causes, due to the lack of a personal God and the fact that God’s processes are wholly natural. In this way, actions can no longer be explained as taking place due to God acting in a vengeful or wrathful way, or on the flipside, as the acts of a loving and benevolent God. Although on the surface this may appear as a rather mundane or pedestrian concern, when given more thought, this turns out to have rather deep implications. For example, one can no longer claim to have been blessed or cursed by God. God is no longer understood as the active guide of a person’s actions. Instead, a person rises or falls through their actions alone and, is therefore unable to blame God for their shortcomings or praise God for their successes. On a wider social and political scale, what this rejects is the ability for one subsection of society to lay claim to a privileged access to God. There is no such thing, for example, as ‘God’s chosen people’, any more then there is a ‘God’s chosen elephant or cheetah’.

The third and final impact that will be discussed is Spinoza’s rejection of freedom and free will. As Curley writes, “freedom is an illusion.”\(^1\) Or, as Spinoza succinctly states, “those ... who believe that they either speak or are silent, or do anything from a free decision of the mind, dream with open eyes.”\(^2\) This illusion or dreaming is fostered along because people “believe themselves free only because they

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\(^1\) Curley, 82
\(^2\) 3p, 2p, Schol.
are aware of their actions and not aware of the causes by which their actions are determined.” Spinoza’s rejection of freedom and free will is a necessary consequence of not only his strict adherence to naturalism, but also his understanding of the mind/body interaction. In other words, if nothing can exist outside the immanent causal laws of substance or God, (including people), and if the phenomena of the world are determined under certain restrictions, then it is impossible for such a thing as freedom or free will to exist. This is connected to the mind/body interaction insofar as they are both the same thing, understood through different attributes, which are caused by one and the same substance. Therefore, the mind of a person is just as determined and no more free than a fly’s. It is simply that a person’s brain and cognitive functioning is far more complex than that of a fly’s. As Spinoza writes,

the decisions of the mind are nothing but the appetites themselves, which therefore vary as the disposition of the body varies. For each one governs everything from his affect; those who are torn by contrary affects do not know what they want, and those who are not moved by any affect are very easily driven here and there.

All these things, indeed, show clearly that the decision of the mind and the appetite and determination of the body by nature exist together – or rather, are one and the same thing, which we call a decision when it is considered under, and explained through the attribute of thought, and which we call a determination when it is considered under the attribute of extension and deduced from the laws of motion and rest

Returning to the question of whether or not this understanding of a naturalistic God necessarily destroys any potential for moral values, the simple answer is: yes.

This destruction however, is not Spinoza’s final word on the subject. In place of a transcendent morality that is rooted in a fixed realm sustained and supported by

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3 Curley, 81
4 3p, p2, Schol. – As quoted in Curley, pp. 82
God’s commandments, Spinoza wants to argue: *given that the world is a natural process that is governed by natural processes, it only makes sense to frame an ethics around a naturalized understanding of human need and bodily function.* It is for this reason, as mentioned earlier, that Spinoza crafts an ethics that is built around bodily affectivity. To increase the emotions, which enhance one’s capacity to act, and to decrease one’s more debilitating emotions, is a good thing. In short, actions can no longer be categorized as ‘Good and Evil’, but instead must be categorized as ‘Good and Bad’ – a categorization that is based around how objects affect us bodily and not around how they have been deemed evil based upon an a priori transcendent understanding which excludes bodily affectivity. It is because of this that Spinoza is considered by some scholars to be

the Christ of philosophers, and the greatest philosophers are hardly more than apostles who distance themselves from or draw near to this mystery. Spinoza, the infinite becoming-philosopher: he showed, drew up, and thought the “best” plane of immanence – that is, the purest, the one that does not hand itself over to the transcendent, the one that inspires the fewest illusions, bad feelings, and erroneous perceptions.

*Coda*

Although Spinoza rejects many of the traditional western understandings of God, this does not mean that his God is any less deserving of the title. *If* Spinoza were an atheist, the considerable effort undertaken by him to outline God’s existence would seem slightly counter-productive. It could still be argued that although Spinoza is, in

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5 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 60. Hegel expressed a similar view when “in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* he described Spinoza’s idea of substance as ‘the foundation of all true views’. Thought must begin, he suggests, by ‘placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism’. To be a follower of Spinoza is ‘the essential commencement of all Philosophy’. The activity of philosophy must begin by the soul’s ‘bathing in this ether of the one substance’, which is ‘the liberation of the mind and its absolute foundation’.” Lloyd, 17
using the term, sticking within a long tradition, his purpose is nonetheless to refute the existence of God, using the same language that others used to confirm God’s existence. Consequently, his use of the term is more a product of the time he lived in or a rhetorical device, than it is an indicator of any sort of commitment to God’s actual existence. As a result, it could also be argued that if Spinoza lived today he would be a proud atheist. Although there is always a chance that this is the case, in so many areas of his thought Spinoza is so iconoclastic, why would he, simply to appease tradition, a tradition he clearly broke with, retain a word, idea, and concept that holds no meaning for him? If God is so unimportant to him, why did he not just stick with the philosophically and theologically neutral term: substance? This explanation for Spinoza’s use of the word God completely overlooks the fact that “the Ethics represents a complete and radical rupture with the medieval philosophical legacy that still pervaded the seventeenth-century philosophical world.”6 According to Seymour Feldman the consequence of this is that Spinoza is “the first philosopher since Philo who succeeded in making a clean and decisive break with religious tradition.”7 If this is true, this would make Spinoza “the first modern philosopher”8 and not Descartes. Harry Wolfson put this idea forward in his impressive two-volume study of Spinoza’s philosophy.9

7 Ibid, 5
8 Ibid, 5
9 It may strike the reader as odd that Harry Wolfson and his two-volume study on Spinoza has all been but ignored throughout this thesis. The reason behind this exclusion was undertaken for purely philosophical reasons that are perfectly expressed by Bennett: “I am sure to make mistakes because of my inattention to Spinoza’s philosophical ancestry; but I will pay that price for the benefits which accrue from putting most of one’s energies into philosophically interrogating Spinoza’s own text. I am encouraged in this by the massive work in which Wolfson places Spinoza in a densely described
It makes more sense to understand what Spinoza does, not as an act of denial, but as an act of radical re-conceptualization. That it is possible to both affirm God’s immanent existence along with the scientific and philosophical commitments that this entails. Hegel once remarked that rather than not being enough God in Spinoza’s philosophy, there is actually too much. It would seem that for Spinoza, there never could be such a thing as too much God. A person’s happiness and their ability to lead a good and ethical life depend on a complete submersion into God, and not a rejection of God’s existence. Spinoza’s philosophy hinges upon, and is built around the notion of a God that is the expressive cause of all that is the case. Without this, Spinoza’s philosophy is no longer his philosophy, and, more importantly, his ethical and metaphysical commitments are no longer his.

Edwin Curley argues, “it is hard to see how any philosopher could give a greater priority to knowledge of the body than Spinoza has.” In a post-Nietzschean intellectual climate, where discussing the role of the body has become standard practice, it may seem irrelevant to highlight this part of Spinoza’s philosophy. Doing so, however, is relevant for two reasons. The first reason is of course the fact that Spinoza uses his understanding of the body and its role in our day-to-day lives, as a means of framing his ethical structure. The second reason is that, despite the long list of philosophers since Spinoza who have given pride of place to the body, none have

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medieval setting: the labor and learning are awesome, but the philosophical profit is almost nil.”
Bennett, 16

10 “The world has no true reality, and all this that we know as the world has been cast into the abyss of one identity. There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth value whatever; according to Spinoza what is, is God and God alone. Therefore the allegations of those who accuse Spinoza of atheism are the direct opposite of the truth; with him there is too much God.” Hegel as quoted in Lloyd, pp. 17

11 Curley, 77
done with it what Spinoza is able to achieve. Arguably without the body there is no Spinoza. For some, this is ample evidence of Spinoza's materialism. As previously discussed, the allure of this position has been too great for some to resist, and not doing so leads to a categorical misreading of Spinoza's philosophy. Spinoza's understanding of the body must be placed back into context with the rest of his philosophical system. When this is done, it is quickly realized that although Spinoza does provide room for not only the body but also the concept of corporeality to flourish, this does not provide the final word on Spinoza's thinking regarding matter. As previously mentioned, substance or God does contain corporeality, which allows for matter and bodies to play a central role in, not only his ethical structure, but also his philosophy as a whole. In the end though, Spinoza understands corporeality as something that is impossible to divide, and as we have already seen throughout the final two chapters, matter is something inherently divisible. What this tells us then, is that a materialist reading of Spinoza is unable to account for the indivisibility of substance and its attributes, which is a position that Spinoza's philosophy simply cannot support, even if this position is given the title “materialistic monism.”

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12 Ibid, 82
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"Is it possible not to love Spinoza"

Slavoj Zizek
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