

Notes on Unit #2: Monism (Hobbes and Spinoza)

§I. Monism: An Introduction

I.1. Monism and the Problem of Interaction

Our second unit consists of readings from the master works of two monists: Thomas Hobbes and Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza.

Monism is motivated largely by the problem of interaction in the theory of mind.

The problem of interaction is to describe how our bodies and minds could interact, if they are indeed, as Descartes argues, two independent substances.

Our bodies affect our minds; our minds affect our bodies.

If they are independent substances, it is hard to see how they could do so.

Gilbert Ryle, defending behaviorism about the mind in the twentieth century, accused Descartes of having to rely on “theoretical shuttlecocks” to transfer information from one domain to the other.

Or, to put it in a Hamilton-relevant way: Why does the mind get drunk when the body does the drinking? To some people, the problem of interaction for a substance dualist like Descartes appears intractable.

In order to focus the question, Descartes posits that interactions between the mind and body take place in one particular place in the human body, the seat of the soul.

Descartes located the seat of the soul in the pineal gland.

Here is a copy of [a letter Descartes wrote about the pineal gland](#).

Descartes’s view that the pineal gland is the location where the soul interacts with the body does not solve the problem of interaction; it merely locates the problem.

We could understand, for example, how a computer chip placed in or near our brain might control us, if we were being externally directed by alien masters.

In such a case, the interaction between the controlling chip and our bodies would be purely physical.

If the controller were not any kind of physical object, it is difficult to see how it could have any effects on physical objects.

One way to solve the problem of interaction is to deny the dualist’s claim that the mind and body are distinct substances.

There are two obvious monist options.

The materialist claims that the mind is really just the body.

Hobbes is a materialist monist.

The world (I mean not the earth only, that denominates the lovers of it *worldly men*, but the *universe*, that is, the whole mass of all things that are) is corporeal, that is to say, body, and has the dimensions of magnitude, namely, length, breadth, and depth. Also every part of body is likewise body, and has the like dimensions, and consequently every part of the universe is body; and that which is not body is no part of the universe. And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing, and consequently nowhere (*Leviathan* §I.46, AW 133b).

In contrast, an idealist monist claims that there are no bodies; there are only minds.

Berkeley is an idealist monist.

Leibniz is also an idealist, though he writes as if there is a material world.

I.2. Spinoza's Monism

Spinoza is also a monist, but not in so obvious a way as Hobbes or Berkeley.

His monism is neither idealist nor materialist; one might call him a weirdo monist.

More accurately, we might call him a completist monist.

For Spinoza, there is only one substance, which he calls God.

You might prefer to think of that one substance as nature, or Nature.

Indeed, Spinoza takes 'God' and 'Nature' to be synonyms.

Spinoza's one substance, God or Nature, has many attributes, both mental and physical (and others!).

So, there is just one kind of thing (monism), but it has many aspects, or properties.

In other words, whereas most philosophers take minds and bodies to be substances, Spinoza takes them to be properties of a single substance called God, or Nature.

Thinking about Hobbes and Spinoza as being motivated by the problem of interaction is not a bad way to start reading them.

Indeed, it might be accurate that they were themselves motivated to solve the problem of interaction.

But I am not convinced that the problem of interaction is as intractable as people take it to be.

The problem of interaction seems to require magic, which appears to debar a solution.

But positing a non-corporeal soul already commits you to a kind of magic.

Once you are committed to magic, the problem of interaction just requires more of the same.

The problem seems to be with the dualism, not with explaining the mind-body interaction.

Either way, it would be useful to find a non-dualist alternative to Descartes's metaphysics, which is why we turn to Hobbes (today) and Spinoza (next).

§II. Hobbesian Materialism and Conscious Experience

II.1. Mental Causation

While it is tempting to depict the materialist as claiming that there are no minds, such a picture can be misleading.

The materialist's claim is really that what we normally think of as a mind can be explained on the basis of matter: the mind is the brain.

Still, Hobbes's claim is definitely a rejection of Descartes's substance dualism.

(Hobbes wrote the hostile, and not very good, third set of objections to Descartes's *Meditations*.)

The challenge for any materialist is to account for mental phenomena, especially mental causation.

While my conscious states may not be thought of as real qualities of external objects, they are real qualities of my conscious mind.

Further, they seem to have some effect on my actions.

If I am in pain, I will act in ways that I will not act if I am not in pain.

I judge whether to eat one apple over another on the basis of the sense qualities they appear to me to have.

But mental states like pain or color or texture seem to resist physical explanation.

They are private and privileged.

The problem of mental causation is to explain how such thoughts, indeed any thoughts, can have causal powers.

Hobbes's solution to the problem of mental causation consists in his insistence that mental phenomena are motions in the nerves and brain.

Motions are paradigmatic physical phenomena.

Remember, according to Galileo, interactions of particles are limited to transfer of momentum.

In rejecting the Aristotelian account of perception, Galileo and Descartes argued that nothing could be given to us by external objects except their motions.

Hobbes thus holds fast to the core idea of Galilean science, that all that exists are particles in motion.

The cause of sense is the external body, or object, which presses the organ proper to each sense, either immediately, as in taste and touch, or mediately, as in seeing, hearing, and smelling; this pressure, by the mediation of nerves and other strings and membranes of the body, continues inwards to the brain and heart, causes there a resistance, or counterpressure, or endeavor of the heart, to deliver itself; this endeavor, because *outward*, seems to be some matter without. And this *seeming*, or, *fancy*, is that which men call *sense*... All...qualities called *sensible* are in the object that causes them but so many several motions of the matter, by which it presses our organs diversely. Neither in us that are pressed are they anything else but diverse motions (**for motion produces nothing but motion**) (*Leviathan* §1.1, AW 116; bold emphasis added).

As we saw in our discussion of Descartes's rejection of the resemblance hypothesis, it is a fundamental principle of the new science that objects as we experience them may be thoroughly different from how they are in themselves.

Descartes, argued that the wax is a body which can take various manifestations, hot or cold, sweet or tasteless, but is identified with none of these particular sensory qualities.

That is, physical objects are essentially extended things, made of parts which may or may not be in motion, both together and relative to each other.

Hobbes embraces this fundamental principle, which becomes known as the veil of perception, ascribing a profound error to those, like Aristotle, who hold a resemblance hypothesis.

The third [cause of absurd assertions] I ascribe to the giving of the names of the *accidents* of *bodies without us* to the *accidents* of our *own bodies*; as they do who say the *color is in the body*; the *sound is in the air*, etc. (*Leviathan* §1.5, AW 127b)

Hobbes agrees with Descartes and Galileo that sensible properties are merely the results of interactions between our bodies and other bodies.

They are not, as Aristotle had alleged, real properties of external objects.

Hobbes, Galileo, and Descartes all believe that physical objects are just particles in motion, and they can communicate this motion to us.

Hobbes's metaphysics, then, is essentially Galilean: the world consists of particles, or atoms, in motion.

II.2. Consciousness

Given the Galilean view of the world, to account for our conscious experience, like yellowness or pain or the harmony of a Bach concerto, Descartes posits a non-physical mind.

For Descartes, the material world is fully Galilean.

Conscious experience occurs out of the world, in the soul.

Descartes thus gets to have the Galilean view of the world while not giving up the reality of our sense experience.

The cost, of course, is substance dualism and the problem of interaction.

Hobbes, in contrast, denies that we must posit a non-physical substance to account for conscious experience. Our conscious experience just is the motion of particles.

Descartes allowed for the reality of sensory properties as features of our immaterial mental lives.

Hobbes, denying everything immaterial, is forced to deny the reality of sense properties completely.

Hobbes's claim sounds almost impossible to take seriously: how could the sound of the concerto just be the motion of air, or the vibration of the tympanic membrane?

What could be more different than motion of air and sound?

Ockhamist grounds (parsimony) might favor Hobbes's materialism (biting the bullet on sensory properties) over Descartes's dualism (biting the bullet on the problem of interaction) for occurrent sensory states.

Hobbes only posits one kind of thing, whereas Descartes posits two.

William of Ockham (1287-1347) encouraged philosophers not to multiply entities beyond necessity.

Hobbes's account of my occurrent sensory states seems preferable just for being less profligate.

But when we consider ideas of memory and fantasy, Hobbes's account of mental phenomena is less compelling.

Hobbes must account for mental states which are not obviously caused by transfers of momentum from objects to our senses, as when we are thinking about something that happened yesterday, or ten years ago.

Besides our faculties of memory and fantasy, Hobbes also needs to account for our ability to deduce new ideas by reasoning.

We can derive new theorems in mathematics, infer laws of physics, and, more simply, make common deductions about the world around us.

The challenge for Hobbes's materialism is to provide an account of human reasoning which does not rely on an independent, thinking substance.

II.3. Memory and Inertia

Hobbes responds to the challenge by relying on the [Galilean/Newtonian concept of inertia](#).

Once our ideas are set in motion by sensation, once they enter our imagination, they remain in motion.

The physical effects of our sense experience, fancies, continue in our brains, slowing down only when impeded by other fancies.

We associate ideas as we experienced them, remembering a sequence as we first sensed it.

Memory, which is just imagination in time, fades as we accrue more experiences.

Occurrent sensory images drown out the former ideas, as the sun obscures the distant stars.

So, Hobbes accounts for memory on the basis of the remaining inert, yet obscured, motions of particles in the body.

All fancies are motions within us, relics of those made in the sense, and those motions that immediately succeeded one another in the sense, continue also together after sense, inasmuch as the former coming again to take place and be predominant, the latter follows, by coherence of the matter moved, in such manner as water upon a plain table is drawn which way any one part of it is guided by the finger (*Leviathan* §I.3, AW 119b).

To account for ideas of fantasy, Hobbes says that we can recombine parts of different memories (as of a horse and a bird), to create new images (as of a flying horse).

The passive succession of thoughts is controlled by our external experience.

Our active control of thoughts, as we seek causes and effects, is guided by our will.

In Hobbes's favor, notice that he provides a scientifically testable theory, a research program.

The longer the time is, after the sight or sense of any object, the weaker is the imagination (*Leviathan* §I.2, AW 117b).

We could test Hobbes's claim in a way that Descartes's claims about the soul appear untestable.

Against Hobbes, while it is true that our memories fade, it does not seem that they do so in proportion to time, alone.

My memory of a minor event yesterday is no more faint than my memory of an important event which occurred years ago.

Still, no one really understands how memory works.

Even if we accept Hobbes's accounts of memory and fantasy, it is hard to see how those accounts could lead to a full Cartesian account of reasoning.

Perhaps Descartes overemphasized the clarity of reasoning.

Still, Hobbes only gives us an account by which images which were together when originally sensed remain together in memory.

II.4. Perception

A related problem for Hobbes's scientific account involves the effect of our interests in our perception.

Hobbes holds to what one might call a stamp view of perceptions.

On the stamp view, the world impresses itself on our sense organs like an inked stamp on paper.

Whatever is on the stamp gets transferred to the paper; whatever properties are in the world get transferred to our sense organs.

But we do not see just a visual manifold.

Rather, we pick out items based on our desires and preconceptions.

Consider the phenomena of [attention blindness](#); [more attention blindness](#); or [change blindness](#).

Perception is more selective and subtle than a mere stamp.

Hobbes is wrong about many of his empirical claims.

The metaphor of water on a table is evocative, but not very convincing.

Hobbes is working with a naive psychology.

But his work is important because it is a precedent for precisely the kind of theory that scientists want.

Hobbes provides a step toward a fully materialist theory of mental causation.

Before moving on, I will just mention that contemporary theories of perception are consistent with this claim that the impingement of our retinas by light causes us to see.

But, for both the moderns and the contemporary neuroscientist, we lack an explanation of the connection between my conscious experience and its cause.

Why is it that such and such motions in the air cause me to hear a symphony?

Why is it that certain wavelengths of light cause me to see blue?

These are questions to which we still lack satisfying answers.

§III. Hobbes's Empiricism

III.1. Against Cartesian Rationalism

We have been looking at Hobbes's metaphysics and his philosophy of mind.
But we started with an epistemological problem, the problem of interaction.
Hobbes's work is not merely motivated by the desire to avoid substance dualism.
He believes that much of both the medieval, scholastic philosophy and Descartes's work is nonsensical.

For Descartes, ideas of the self, God, and mathematics are innate, built into our minds.
Laws of physics, depending on mathematics, are also innate, the result of pure, intellectual judgment.
Descartes and Hobbes both defended the new science and its method of experimentation.
The new science posits a world of material objects, which we think of through use of the imagination.
For Descartes, though, these images are confused; the only real properties are those we can understand by pure reason, through innate ideas.

Hobbes is the first of our empiricists.

Like Locke and Berkeley later, he wants to explain all knowledge by sense experience, avoiding Descartes's innate ideas.

He defines truth and falsity in terms of the correspondence of language to the world.

Terms of language stand for our ideas, the images left by sense experience in our brains.

The discussion of language, and trains of thought, in §3 and §4 of *Leviathan*, emphasizes the strict connection between science, the result of connecting our ideas, and sense experience.

Hobbes distinguishes between error and absurdity, and accuses philosophers like Descartes of absurdity arising from using words with no origins in the senses.

The first cause of absurd conclusions I ascribe to the want of method, in that they do not begin their ratiocination from definitions, that is, from settled significations of their words, as if they could cast accounts without knowing the value of the numeral words, *one, two, and three* (*Leviathan* §I.5, AW 127a).

Hobbes enumerates several particular complaints of purported misuses of language.

We have already looked at one of those errors, ascribing a sense property to an external object.

More importantly, for Hobbes, the concept of an incorporeal body, like a spirit or angel, arises from a misuse of words.

His criticism, in §46, of separated essences is related.

III.2. Materialism and Atheism

Given his empiricism and his materialism, one might infer that Hobbes is an atheist.

Whether Hobbes is an atheist is a much-debated question.

Certainly, his materialism makes any theism he might hold odd; God would have to be a material object.

One way to see this oddity is to consider the question of whether a finite being can have an infinite idea.

Everyone in the modern era, I think, agreed that there can be no sensory experience which leads to an infinite idea, since they mainly took ideas to be like pictures.

One of Descartes's lasting innovations was to separate thought from sensation, paving the way for his claims that finite beings can have infinite ideas.

Descartes concedes that an infinite idea could not come from sense experience.

Thus, we must have ideas that do not come from the senses, i.e. innate ideas.

In particular, our idea of God is infinite and non-sensory.

Another option would be to infer from our inability to have an infinite idea that we have no idea of God.

A third option would be to argue that the idea of God is not infinite.

Either of the latter two ideas would be consistent with Hobbes's other view.

A material deity seems consistent with Hobbes's discussion of spirits in §34.

While he does refer to some religious texts, he also tries to eliminate religion from philosophy.

Thus philosophy excludes from itself theology, as I call the doctrine about the nature and attributes of the eternal, ungenerable, and incomprehensible God, and in whom no composition and no division can be established and no generation can be understood (*De Corpore*, §1.8).

III.3. Language and Epistemology

Religion aside, Hobbes clearly wants to rid philosophy of obscure concepts, cleaning epistemology, and focusing on the pragmatic benefits.

On the pragmatic side, Hobbes thinks that the goal of language generally, not just philosophy, is human flourishing.

Without words there is no possibility of reckoning of numbers, much less of magnitudes, of swiftness, of force, and other things, the reckonings of which are necessary to the being, or well-being, or mankind (*Leviathan* §I.4, AW 123b).

And,

By PHILOSOPHY is understood *the knowledge acquired by reasoning, from the manner of the generation of anything, to the properties, or from the properties to some possible way of generation of the same, to the end to be able to produce, as far as matter and human force permit, such effects as human life requires* (*Leviathan* §I.46, AW 132a).

As for cleaning epistemology, not only does Hobbes urge us to rid philosophy of religion, but also of other abstract concepts.

In reasoning a man must take heed of words, which besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker - such as are the names of virtues and vices, for one man calls *wisdom* what another calls *fear*; and one *cruelty*, what another *justice*, one *prodigality*, what another *magnanimity*; and one *gravity*, what another *stupidity*, etc. And therefore such names can never be true grounds of any ratiocination. No more can metaphors, and tropes of speech; but these are less dangerous, because they profess their inconstancy, which the others do not (*Leviathan* §I.4, AW 125b)

Similarly, Hobbes rejects metaphysical approaches to science.

In many occasions they put for cause of natural events, their own ignorance, but disguised in other words, as when they say, fortune is the cause of things contingent - that is, of things whereof they know no cause - and as when they attribute many effects to *occult qualities* - that is, qualities not known to them, and therefore also (as they think) to no one else - and to *sympathy*, *antipathy*, *antiperistasis*, *specific qualities*, and other like terms, which signify neither the agent that produces them, nor the operation by which they are produced. If such *metaphysics* and *physics* as this be not *vain philosophy*,

there was never any; nor needed St. Paul to give us warning to avoid it (*Leviathan* §I.46, AW 136b).

These revolutionary claims about ridding philosophy of absurdities arising from the misuse of language will recur throughout the modern era; we'll see them again in Berkeley and Hume, especially.

§IV. Evaluating Hobbes's Materialist Monism

In order to accommodate thoughts about God, mathematics, and physics, Descartes distinguishes between thought and sensation, denigrating the latter.

Hobbes rejects Descartes's opposition of sensing and thinking.

In this way, Hobbes is a reactionary.

Hobbes wants to return to the materialism of Aristotle while accommodating the new science.

Hobbes's materialism has parsimony in its favor.

Also, Hobbes provides a plausible account of mental causation: since all mental phenomena are physical phenomena, the laws of mental causation are the same as the laws of physics.

Still, he lacks a convincing scientific account of human reasoning.

Descartes overemphasized the purity of reason; Hobbes's account is anemic.

The claim that conscious states are just motions of particles seems nearly incomprehensible.

Hobbes neglects the problem that motion is not color.

Why do we see yellow lemons, instead of just extensions in motion?

We might say that the lemon has a dispositional property which makes us see it as yellow.

But the dispositional property is not yellowness, which is a property only of my experience.

The claim that conscious experiences arise from the interaction of dispositional properties and our sensory apparatus will be revived in the twentieth century in mind-brain identity theory, or topic-neutral materialism, though, so we should not dismiss it completely.)

One response, which Locke will make, is to remain mysterian about conscious experience.

A mysterian says that it is equally a mystery why conscious experiences should attach to minds or to bodies.

Berkeley is unsatisfied with this kind of giving-up on the problem.

He argues that we can resolve the problems by adopting a different kind of monism.

The central problem with Hobbes's account of mental phenomena is that it is tied too closely to an outdated physical theory.

Hobbes's general account of thought was rather hamstrung by his obsession with mechanics (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. IV, p 38).

Galilean mechanics, on which all force is impact, has been superceded several times, first by Newtonian gravitational theory, then by Einsteinian relativity theory, as well as other mechanical theories.

Contemporary materialists try to improve on Hobbes's account, while maintaining its spirit.

V. Reading Spinoza's *Ethics*

V.1. The Difficulty of the Work

Spinoza's work comes largely as a response to Descartes's philosophy.

One helpful way to look at Spinoza's project is to see it as attempting to find a middle path between Descartes's mind/body dualism and Hobbes's materialist monism.

Spinoza believed that Descartes relied on a common, perhaps anthropomorphic, understanding of God.

Spinoza pursues a purer concept, one which emphasizes the omnipresence of God over attributes, like perfect goodness or will, which seem to ascribe human characteristics to an infinite being.

The Ethics is difficult and obscure, and resists easy analysis.

It is arranged in a synthetic, or geometric, mode of presentation, based on the structure of Euclid's *Elements*.

Today, we would call the structure formal, or axiomatic.

The most fundamental [mathematical and logical theories](#) are, or can be, presented axiomatically.

Physical theories, too, may be presented axiomatically.

Spinoza starts with a list of definitions and fundamental axioms, and proceeds to derive, in some sense, a series of propositions expounding his philosophy.

The proofs are intended, presumably, to justify each proposition.

They are often difficult to follow, and do not seem to work.

Here is a prominent contemporary scholar of modern philosophy on Spinoza's proofs:

The deductive apparatus masks Spinoza's philosophy. For certain of his deepest and most central doctrines he offers 'demonstrations' that are unsalvageably invalid and of *no philosophical use or interest*; it is not credible that he accepts those doctrines because he thinks they follow from the premisses of those arguments (Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, vol. 1: 113, emphasis added).

Here's Nietzsche on Spinoza:

Not to speak of that hocus-pocus of mathematical form in which, as if in iron, Spinoza encased and masked his philosophy...so as to strike terror into the heart of any assailant who should happen to glance at that invincible maiden and Pallas Athene - how much personal timidity and vulnerability this masquerade of a sick recluse betrays (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §5).

And Nietzsche liked Spinoza!

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted. I have a *predecessor*, and what a predecessor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just *now* was inspired by "instinct." Not only is his overall tendency like mine - making knowledge the *most powerful* affect - but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergences are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the differences in time, culture, and science. *In summa*: my solitude, which, as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and made my blood rush out, is at least a dualitude (Letter to Franz Overbeck, 30 July 1881).

Reading Spinoza, first focus on the propositions and the scholia, leaving the proofs for a second and third reading.

In the scholia, comments located after the proofs of selected propositions, Spinoza relaxes from the formal structure and tries to explain what he means, and how propositions are related.

The Appendix to Part One is similarly informal, and helpful.

Even focusing on the propositions themselves, the scholia, and the Appendix, it is often difficult to see the central claims that Spinoza wants to make.

And then, we want not merely to understand a claim, but also to understand the argument for that claim, so that we may critically evaluate it.

Some secondary reading for Spinoza will be essential.

Melchert mainly avoids Spinoza, except for a helpful few paragraphs.

I have found Bennett's collection, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, to be invaluable.

Bennett engages the secondary literature in a sophisticated way.

These notes, relying in large part on the expositions in Bennett and elsewhere, will be more basic.

V.2. Our Approach to *The Ethics*

You may notice that Spinoza's work is called *The Ethics* though the subjects of most of the work we shall read are mainly metaphysical.

The claim underlying Spinoza's title is that a proper understanding of metaphysics leads one to right behavior, a kind of eternity of the mind, and proper worship of God.

We will focus on three aspects of Spinoza's philosophy:

1. Monist metaphysics;
2. The relationship between mind and body; and
3. Freedom of the will and the problem of error.

While Spinoza holds views that often do violence to common sense, he is not a mystic.

His parallelism debars him from treating any aspect of the mental as 'occult' or 'queer'... and his naturalism debars him from treating anything as occult or inexplicable (Bennett 196).

When trying to figure out what his views are, one does well to try to interpret him charitably, as difficult as you may find the task.

One final suggestion: Isaac Bashevis Singer has a wonderful short story, "[The Spinoza of Market Street](#)."

§VI. Spinoza's Monism

VI.1. An Overview

Spinoza believes that there is just one thing: the most real being.

Mostly, he calls this thing God, though he also calls it Nature.

Spinoza often uses the phrase, 'Deus sive Natura': God, in other words Nature.

Individual bodies and minds are attributes of this single substance.

We, and all the things around us, are ways of God/Nature to be.

One way to understand Spinoza's monism is to consider the oddity of thinking about the existence of both God and a distinct world.

If God were separate from the world, then God would not be omnipresent.

Spinoza argues, in the words here of Jonathan Bennett, that there can not be two Gods.

If there are two Gods, then either God A knows about God B or he does not. If he does not, he is not omniscient and so is not a God (in the Christian sense). If he does, then he is partly passive - acted upon - because he is in a state of knowledge of God B which must be caused in him by God B - and so again he is not a Christian God (Bennett 119).

One can replace God B in this argument with anything.
The argument rules out not only another God, but also any other reality.
This sort of argument has its roots in the ancient Eleatics Parmenides and Melissus.
Parmenides used the argument to show that Being is one and immutable.

For Spinoza, if we think of ourselves as individuals separate from God, we are limiting an infinite God.
On the basis of just the infinitude of God, then, Spinoza derives his monism.
God just is the world, and we are not individuals separate from God.
We are part of God, modes or attributes of God, ways for God to be.

Spinoza's monism earned him excommunication from his Jewish community and derision alternately as an atheist and a pantheist.
It is clear that Spinoza rejected traditional religious views; it is not clear that he was an atheist.
He lived a quiet and solitary life.
Despite corresponding with many of the scholars of his day, Spinoza preferred to avoid established universities, and worked as a lens grinder, living meanly and writing.

Our discussion of Spinoza's monism will take three steps.¹
First, I discuss the argument that substance exists (E).
Then the argument that is infinite (I).
Lastly that it is unique (U).

VI.2. Substance Exists

Let's start with the claim that there is substance, or a substance.

- E E1. Substance is independent.
- E2. Whatever has an external cause can not be independent.
- E3. So, substance has no external cause, and must be its own cause.
- E4. Anything which is its own cause must exist.
- EC. So substance exists.

E1 follows from Spinoza's definitions, most saliently 1D3.²

By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed (*Ethics* 1D3, AW 144).

¹ Here I largely follow Jeffrey Tlumak in *Classical Modern Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge, 2006).

² Note: references to *The Ethics* are written, for example, as 1D3 (Definition 3 in Part 1) or 2P7 (Proposition 7 of Part 2).

This claim may be obscure to us, but there is a fairly easy way to understand his point.

Remember that Descartes distinguished, as we do in ordinary language, between objects and properties.

Another term for 'object' is 'substance'; other terms for 'property' are 'mode', 'attribute', and 'affection'.

It is also traditional, and not particularly contentious, to argue that properties depend on objects in a way that objects do not depend on properties.

That claim is just the general principle from which the particular claim that for redness to exist, there must exist red things follows.

Properties need to be properties of something.

Things need to have properties of course, but do not depend on particular properties for their existence.

The red car can be painted yellow without ceasing to be what it is.

Spinoza's claim that substance is independent is just that things are prior to their modes, with the caveat that there may not be more than one thing.

Spinoza takes E2 as a definition.

And E3 follows from E1 and E2 directly (by modus tollens, for you logicians).

E4 is more problematic.

Spinoza is relying on an interpretation of 'cause' that would have been easily understood by his scholastic contemporaries, but which has disappeared with the modern concept of causation.

Spinoza's understanding of cause is connected to questions about the existence of a first cause, and related arguments for the existence of God, the uncaused, or self-caused, cause.

Plato and Aristotle, and other ancients, discussed an uncaused cause.

Cosmological arguments for the existence of God, understood as the uncaused cause, trace to Aquinas.

Definition 1 of *The Ethics* indicates Spinoza's view and alludes to an ontological argument right away.

By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing (*Ethics* 1D1, AW 144).

Spinoza's arguments for the existence, and necessary existence, of God, and his characterizations of God, proceed through Proposition 15 of Part 1, but I will not pursue them in detail, here.

The point we need to understand is how Spinoza understood 'cause' in such a way that anything which is its own cause must exist.

Notice that the very notion of an uncaused cause is pretty much completely unintelligible on a contemporary understanding of 'cause'.

Putting aside worries from quantum mechanics and relativity theory about backwards causation, for the contemporary reader, a cause must be temporally prior to its effect, by definition.

Spinoza is clearly using a different interpretation.

We can start to understand Spinoza's notion of 'cause' by thinking of it as related to explanation.

A cause of something may explain its existence.

Even on a contemporary understanding, the cause of an event might explain it.

If you ask why I am tired, I can explain that it is because I did not get much sleep last night.

Asserting the existence of an unexplained cause, or an unexplained explanation, or a phenomenon which explains itself, is not as repugnant as asserting the existence of an uncaused, or self-caused, cause.

And it is only a very short step from saying that God is an unexplained cause to saying that God's existence needs no explanation, or that something which is self-caused could not be conceived of as not existing.

That last claim is E4.

E4 and E3 entail the conclusion EC, that substance exists.

While EC seems to depend on a contentious premise, E4, the claim that substance exists is slight.

It is manifest that *something* exists.

We might, with some justification, then, conclude that Spinoza does a lot of work here for a little claim.

I have spent time on it because of the characterizations of substance, cause, and independence we have examined along the way.

In particular, notice that the derivation of the existence of substance makes no reference to how many substances there are, or whether we can differentiate among them.

VI.3. Substance is Infinite

Let's proceed to the infinitude of substance.

- I
 - I1. Substance exists and is its own cause.
 - I2. No finite thing is its own cause.
 - I3. An infinite substance must have all attributes.
 - IC. So, substance must be infinite, and have all attributes

I1 comes directly from the prior argument, E.

For I2, consider Spinoza's definition of finite.

A thing is said to be finite in its own kind when it can be limited by another thing of the same nature. For example, a body is said to be finite because we can always conceive of another body greater than it (1D2, AW 144).

If a thing is finite, then there are other things that limit it.

Explanations about any individual, finite thing are going to appeal to its relations to other things.

Remember, Spinoza's notion of cause is tied to explanation.

If we want to explain why I am typing, we have to appeal to the keyboard, the computer, my students, parents, my family, and more.

Since explanations about any finite thing will depend on other things, finite things can not be their own causes.

As an aside, 1D2 leads us to wonder whether substance (or a substance) can be limited by another thing of the same nature.

Spinoza denies that this is possible.

In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute (*Ethics* 1P5, AW 145).

Attributes are how substances are individuated: different properties, different substance.

If there were two or more substances with the same attributes (or nature) those things would be indistinguishable.

Leibniz later invokes a principle of sufficient reason to block such a possibility: God would have no reason to create two substances with the same attributes.

Spinoza does not appeal to that claim, but, understood correctly, it is actually fairly uncontroversial.

Take any two things; there must be some difference between them.

Even if they were the same internally, they would have to differ in spatio-temporal location.

That's all that 1P5 says, properly speaking.

Its oddity is that Spinoza is taking it to show that there is only one thing.

Two bodies might limit each other, as he explains in 1D2, but that only shows that bodies are not substance (or substances).

I3 is implausible, on the surface.

Some infinite collections omit some things.

A line can travel in one direction without containing all points.

But, Spinoza's claim is clear once we take Spinoza not to distinguish between 'infinite' and 'complete'.

Spinoza thinks of God as not just infinite, but as encompassing everything.

This conception is part of his rejection of Descartes's common, anthropomorphic conception.

VI.4. Substance is Unique

Lastly, let's derive Spinoza's monism, the uniqueness of substance.

- U U1. Substance is infinite, and has all attributes
- U2. There can not be two substances with the same attribute.
- U3. So, at most one substance exists.
- U4. Substance exists.
- UC. So, there is exactly one substance; we can call it God, or Nature.

We have seen both U1 and U2 in the argument I; U3 follows from them.

And U4 is the conclusion of the first argument E; UC follows from it.

The argument is complete.

Some interpreters of Spinoza's work argue that we limit ourselves by thinking of substance as an individual thing.

They suggest that we think of it as the order of things, or the realm of nature.

That approach might be useful, psychologically, but it does not do justice to Spinoza's actual words.

In the Appendix to Part One, Spinoza clarifies his reasons for thinking that everything is God.

Spinoza believes that everything is explicable.

God could not be separate and isolated from the world; that would limit God's power.

If God were separate from the world and interacting with it, then explanation would cease to be possible.

We would have to know God's mind, know God's reasons.

If God interacted with the world, we would have to impute to God will and desire, all properties of finite beings, but only anthropomorphically ascribed to God.

One should not think of God in the image of a human being.

He who loves God will not try to get God to love him back (*Ethics* 5P19, not in AW).

Explanations which appeal to God's will seem to Spinoza to be unsatisfactory.

If a stone falls from a roof on to some one's head and kills him, [those who make God separate from the world] will demonstrate...that the stone fell in order to kill the man; for, if it had not by God's will fallen with that purpose, how could so many circumstances (and there are often many concurrent circumstances) have all happened together by chance? Perhaps you will answer that the event is due to the facts that the wind was blowing, and the man was walking that way. "But why," they will

insist, “was the wind blowing, and why was the man at that very time walking that way?” If you again answer, that the wind had then sprung up because the sea had begun to be agitated the day before, the weather being previously calm, and that the man had been invited by a friend, they will again insist: “But why was the sea agitated, and why was the man invited at that time?” So they will pursue their questions from cause to cause, till at last you take refuge in the will of God - in other words, the sanctuary of ignorance (*Ethics*, 1 Appendix; AW 162a-b, but in an alternate translation).

Compare this passage to the question of why the big bang occurred. Scientific explanations that trace back to the big bang seem to leave open that question, and can never thus be fully satisfying.

But, we might find a more satisfying answer if we altered the way in which we thought about explanation.

I am not clear about how Spinoza’s monism provides more satisfying explanations.

But, Spinoza thought that it did.

§VII. Monism and Dualism

VII.1. Substance Monism and Property Dualism

Given Spinoza’s claim that there is just one substance, we are naturally led to wonder if that substance is material or ideal, if it is body or mind.

Descartes posited both minds and bodies; that makes him a substance dualist.

Hobbes tried to explain everything with just bodies; he is a materialist monist.

Spinoza claims that the one substance is both mind and body.

That is why I called him a weirdo monist.

For Spinoza, there is only one substance, one object, properly speaking.

What we ordinarily think of as objects (e.g. trees, persons, Wankel rotary engines) for Spinoza are properties, or attributes, of God.

There are (lots of) mental properties and there are (lots of) physical properties.

Thus, Spinoza is a substance monist and a property dualist.

VII.2. Contemporary Property Dualism

Property dualism, in Spinoza’s sense, should be distinguished from a current use of that label, though it will be useful to compare them.

Let’s take a moment to understand contemporary property dualism.

We can characterize the contemporary position in contrast to Descartes’s substance dualism.

Recall Descartes’s master argument for substance dualism.

- SD SD1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
 SD2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
 SD3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by
 God, and so are really distinct.
 SDC. So, my mind is distinct from my body.

Some folks, unconvinced by D3, weaken that premise (and the conclusion) to yield an argument for property dualism.

- PD PD1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
 PD2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
 PD3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, are really distinct
 concepts.
 PDC. So, my mind is conceptually distinct from my body. I.e. mental properties are distinct
 from physical properties.

Contemporary property dualists claim that while there is just one substance (which is material) it has some mental properties and some physical ones.

Mental properties, like those that compose our conscious states, are not completely explicable in terms of physical properties.

Contemporary property dualism is more properly seen as the result of recognizing, as we saw in our discussion of Hobbes, that some explanations of mental properties in terms of physical ones are implausible. Hobbes says that pain, or sensation of red, or taste of a mango, is just the firing of neurons in my brain. The claim that a conscious sensation just is, say, retinal stimulation of a certain type accompanied by the firing of certain neurons in the brain seems difficult to defend.

Still, even if we can not identify mental states with physical states, the contemporary materialist might argue that mental states supervene on physical states.

Here is a definition of supervenience from the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

A set of properties A supervenes upon another set B just in case no two things can differ with respect to A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties. In slogan form, “there cannot be an A-difference without a B-difference”.

The proponent of the supervenience thesis maintains the physicalist’s claim that for every mental state there is a corresponding physical state.

But instead of looking for the conscious experience in our brains, as we might think Hobbes recommends, we can look for what we call neural correlates of consciousness.

The property dualist claims that such identifications are category errors: they are different properties, and the one can not be reduced to, or explained in terms of, the other, even if there really are only bodies.

Thus substance monism (there are just physical bodies) is compatible with property dualism (mental properties are irreducible to physical properties).

The contemporary substance monist (i.e. materialist)/property dualist just claims that while everything is physical, there are mental properties (like having conscious experience) that aren’t explicable in physical terms even if they are accountable, in some perhaps causal sense, by interactions in the material world.

Whatever mental properties are, for the contemporary materialist, they don’t force us to posit a separate mental substance.

VII.3. Spinoza’s Property Dualism

Spinoza's property dualism does not have a materialist base.

Moreover, the properties of which Spinoza claims there are two types (mind and body) are ordinarily taken to be substances.

So, Spinoza's property dualism is a different kind than contemporary property dualism.

Still, it shares some of the characteristics of contemporary property dualism.

In particular, Spinoza agrees that there are mental properties and physical properties and neither one explains the other.

VII.4. Spinoza's Monism and the Diversity of Attributes

One lesson that we should learn from studying Hobbes's anemic account of consciousness is that a rejection of Descartes's dualism is trickier than it looks.

It will not do simply to say mental states are physical states.

The deep question is how to take what look to be two things and make them one.

Spinoza's monism is perhaps a subtler and more promising approach than Hobbes's.

Spinoza's one substance, which he calls God or Nature, is infinite.

By 'infinite', Spinoza means complete.

It has all possible attributes.

In particular, it has both mental attributes and physical attributes.

In other words, minds and bodies are both properties of God.

Notice that this means that God is, at least in one attribute, material.

Actually, Spinoza claims that there are more than merely two kinds of attributes.

Each entity must be conceived under some attribute, and the more reality or being it has, the more are its attributes which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity. Consequently, nothing can be clearer than this, too, that an absolutely infinite entity must necessarily be defined (Def. 6) as an entity consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses a definite essence (*Ethics* 1P10, AW 147b).

To think about how there could be further attributes, let's consider a metaphor.

Imagine that there were aliens with an extra capacity for sense perception.

Suppose they had our five senses, but antennae with a sixth kind of receptor in addition.

We perceive the world in only five modalities; the aliens perceive the world in six.

We have absolutely no idea what it would be like to have a sixth sense, but there is no reason to think that there couldn't be such a thing.

So it is with the attributes of God, for Spinoza.

We only know the worlds of minds and bodies.

But there could be other aspects of nature hidden from us.

In fact, for Spinoza, the infinitude of God entails reason to believe that there are other such attributes.

This multiplication of attributes is not a central claim, and affects little in the rest of Spinoza's work.

VII.5. Bodies and Minds

Despite their substance monism, both Spinoza and the contemporary property dualist seem to agree with Descartes about the separation of mind and body (and perhaps other attributes).

Recall Descartes's argument that bodies or machines, like animals, can not think.

He appeals to two characteristics of people: our language use and our behavioral plasticity.

Our bodies are essentially similar to those of animals, perhaps a bit more complex in places.

Yet we can think, and (other) animals can not.

This alone shows Descartes that there must be minds independent of bodies.

For while reason is a universal instrument that can be of help in all sorts of circumstances, these organs require some particular disposition for each particular action; consequently, it is for all practical purposes impossible for there to be enough different organs in a machine to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the same ways as our reason makes us act (*Discourse* Part Five, AW 33a).

Descartes claims that the number of thoughts that we have could not be instantiated in a physical body. It would be like trying to run Windows 10 on a 1960s mainframe computer; it just doesn't fit.

Leibniz, just a bit later, considers walking inside the [mechanical parts of a thinking substance](#), like a brain.

If we imagine that there is a machine whose structure makes it think, sense, and have perceptions, so that we could enter into it, as one enters into a mill. Assuming that, when inspecting its interior, we will only find parts that push one another, and we will never find anything to explain a perception (Leibniz, *Monadology*, §17).

All we would see would be moving parts.

We would see no memory, no thought.

Descartes concludes dualism from the incompatibility of minds and bodies.

Again, the dualist is saddled with a problem of interaction.

The substance monist/property dualist (whether Spinoza or the contemporary one), rejects Descartes's claim that there is an ultimate incompatibility between minds and bodies.

Spinoza's monism is supposed to solve the problem of interaction.

Hobbes's monism solved the problem by denying that there are mental substances.

Spinoza can not invoke that solution since he believes that there are mental attributes of substance and there are physical attributes of substance.

He agrees with Descartes (and against Hobbes) that there is a problem about reconciling the two.

Spinoza is clear about the problem in Part Three, which is not in our reader:

The body cannot determine the mind to thinking, and the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else). Proof: All modes of thinking have God for a cause, insofar as he is a thinking thing, and not insofar as he is explained by another attribute (by 2P6). So what determines the mind to thinking is a mode of thinking and not of extension, that is (by 2D1), it is not the body. This was the first thing. Next, the motion and rest of a body must arise from another body... whatever arises in the body must have arisen from God insofar as he is considered to be affected by some mode of extension, and not insofar as he is considered to be affected by some mode of thinking (also 2P6), that is, it cannot arise from the mind, which (by 2P11) is a mode of thinking. This was the second point. Therefore, the body cannot determine the mind, and so on (*Ethics* 3P2).

Given that a monist metaphysics is largely motivated by the problem of interaction, it is disappointing that the problem reappears for Spinoza at the level of properties.

Nevertheless, Spinoza has a unique and fascinating solution.

He claims that though the mind and body do not interact, they move parallel to each other in such a way as to give the appearance of interaction.

The order and connection of ideas is the same as order and connection of things (*Ethics* 2P7, AW 166).

§VIII. Parallelism

VIII.1. Spinoza's Solution to the Problem of Interaction

Here is how Spinoza's parallelism works.

Let's say your sweetheart gives you a kiss, which makes you feel happy, which in turn makes you hug your sweetie back.

It looks like a physical event causes a mental event which in turn causes another physical event.

Whether these events are made of interacting substances or properties makes no difference.

The point is that there seems to be causation moving from the material to the mental and back.

What is really happening, according to Spinoza's parallelism, is that there are two independent causal sequences.

In the physical chain, the kiss, p_1 , causes a second physical event, p_2 , which causes the hug, p_3 .

In the mental chain, a mental event, m_1 causes the happiness, m_2 , which causes a third mental event, m_3 .

m_1 is the mental correlate of the kiss, and m_3 is the mental correlate of the hug; we are unaware of those ideas.

Similarly, there is a physical correlate, p_2 , of the mental state of happiness.

There is no interaction between the p 's and the m 's.

It appears as if there is interaction because the two chains are aligned just right.

Spinoza's parallelism solves the problem of interaction by explaining how the appearance of interaction can arise from a system in which there is in fact no interaction.

That solution comes at a cost of positing extra mental and physical states.

There must be a mental state corresponding to every physical state, and a physical state corresponding to every mental state.

The contemporary defender of supervenience might subscribe to the latter claim.

The former claim is much more foreign, and difficult to understand.

There seem to be lots of physical states with no corresponding mental state.

What mental state is the correlate of, say, the tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it?

Still, the cost of his profligacy is small since Spinoza is already committed to the broadest possible infinity of states in God.

Moreover, in favor of Spinoza's account, we have to remember that the way we have been speaking, of interaction, is really derived from a view of the world as containing independent substances.

Strictly speaking there is just the one substance.

Talk of interaction between the body and mind should, strictly speaking, be understood more like talk about different properties of the same substance.

Perhaps the difference between the mind and the body is more like the difference between perceiving an object with two different sense modalities: the taste and the look of the apple, say.

Just as we can perceive the wax with our different senses, so we have mental and physical aspects of ourselves.

VIII.2. The Mind Thinks About the Body

This way of bringing together both the monist and parallelist doctrines of Spinoza can be edifying. It helps explain Spinoza's claims that the mind is always thinking about the body.

That which constitutes the actual being of the human mind is basically nothing else but the idea of an individual actually existing thing (*Ethics* 2P11, AW 168b).

Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind is bound to be perceived by the human mind; i.e., the idea of that thing will necessarily be in the human mind. That is to say, if the object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body without its being perceived by the mind (*Ethics* 2P12, AW 169a).

The object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body - i.e., a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else (*Ethics* 2P13, AW 169b).

Recall Descartes's claims that knowledge of the wax brought him even more knowledge of himself. Spinoza is claiming that the wax and one's body and mind are all part of the same whole.

The human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God; and therefore when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing else but this: that God...has this or that idea (*Ethics* 2P11 corollary, AW 169a).

The union of the parallelist and monist aspects of Spinoza's work also allow us to see the relation between Spinoza's monism and Hobbes's monism.

Just as Hobbes's had only a material world with which to work, Spinoza has one, united world.

There are different aspects, or attributes, of this world.

But, they are not to be differentiated and separated; they hang together.

VIII.3. Parallelism and Laws of Motion

Spinoza's rationalism may obscure his other affinities to Hobbes.

While Spinoza's physics purports, like Descartes's, to be based in truths of reason, it adopts the new science's anti-Aristotelian view about inertia, and other anti-scholastic claims.

Spinoza, of course, adds a modal twist to the claim (i.e. that it is necessary)!

A body in motion or at rest must have been determined to motion or rest by another body which likewise has been determined to motion or rest by another body, and that body by another, and so *ad infinitum* (*Ethics* 2P13, AW 170b).

Despite his odd approach, and his weird metaphysics, Spinoza's physics is essentially Cartesian.

Bodies are not independent, and self-subsisting, of course.

We ordinarily think of motion in terms of objects changing their places.

It is hard to see how attributes could move.

The very notion of motion probably has to be altered.

Even if we came up with an account of the motion of attributes, since attributes depend on a substance, and all bodies are part of one substance, the relations among those attributes does not seem to follow directly from our ordinary conception of the relations among bodies.

That is, bodies can move relative to one another, but the relative motion of attributes is less clear.

Spinoza tackles the question in the physical interlude, the discussion following 2P13.

Note how Spinoza turns from his account of motion to a further characterization of monism.

He uses 'individual thing' to refer to particular bodies and minds, recognizing that they are not really objects, but needing a term for them.

We have conceived an individual thing composed solely of bodies distinguished from one another only by motion-and-rest and speed of movement; that is, an individual thing composed of the simplest bodies. If we now conceive another individual thing composed of several individual things of different natures, we shall find that this can be affected in many other ways while still preserving its nature. For since each one of its parts is composed of several bodies, each single part can...without any change in its nature, move with varying degrees of speed and consequently communicate its own motion to other parts with varying degrees of speed. Now if we go on to conceive a third kind of individual thing composed of this second kind, we shall find that it can be affected in many other ways without any change in its form. If we thus continue to infinity, we shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts - that is, all the constituent bodies - vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual whole (*Ethics* 2P13 Lemma 7 Scholium, AW 171-2).

Bennett suggests an analogy for understanding motion in the single substance: consider how a thaw might, in a sense, move across a region.

There's no real motion, just a change in the attributes of something stable.

If Spinoza is really committed to his monism, then what appears as motion is really just a change in the attributes of substance, a change in the way that substance is at a point in space-time.

Still, Spinoza believes that what appear as interactions of bodies, however they are most properly conceived, are governed by laws.

He banishes appeals to final causes and purposes.

The laws of nature govern the behavior of both bodies and mind, making all of our decisions determined.

Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way (*Ethics* 1P29, AW 156).

This strict determinism, for both bodily and mental attributes, will cause difficulty in Spinoza's account of human error, as we will see.

We have looked at Spinoza's metaphysics and his philosophy of mind.

There is just one substance, call it God or Nature, and we are just aspects of that one thing.

Our minds and bodies work in parallel.

They may even be just two different ways of describing the same properties.

The last question we will ask, about Spinoza's work, is how his picture of the world can be compatible with our manifest ability to err.

§IX. Freedom and Error

IX.1. All Ideas are True

At the beginning of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes confronts a serious puzzle in the problem of error.

Once he establishes that we are both created and preserved by an infinitely good God, the possibility of error seems unlikely, despite the fact that we often appear to err.

Descartes's solution is constrained by the need to avoid ascribing imperfections to God while admitting that God's creation is imperfect and prone to error.

Descartes tries to solve that problem by showing how we can act independently of God; that's the two-faculty theory of mind.

Turning to Spinoza, the problem of error appears even more intractable.

Not only are we created and preserved by God, for Spinoza; we are God!

Descartes availed himself of our independence from God: we have free will.

Spinoza denies that we have such freedom, as we have seen.

Descartes can sneak out of the window to go to the party; Spinoza is stuck inside the house.

Further, since we are, in substance, God, it seems that there can be no false ideas; all ideas are true.

All ideas are true insofar as they are related to God (*Ethics* 2P32, AW 178a).

There is nothing positive in ideas whereby they can be said to be false (*Ethics* 2P33, AW 178a).

Every idea which in us is absolute, that is adequate and perfect, is true (*Ethics* 2P34, AW 178a).

Spinoza's solution to the problem of error, in brief, is that while there is no falsity (i.e. every idea is true to some degree) there are clearer ideas and more confused ideas.

The clearer ideas are closest to the truth.

At the upper limit, there are adequate ideas.

In particular, there are geometric ideas which do not admit of any confusion.

But, since we are just one attribute of God, we only have ideas from a particular perspective, and this limitation prevents full and general apprehension of truth.

IX.2. Ideas and Beliefs

Spinoza's account of human error involves his determinism and his interpretation of human freedom.

Let's contrast his position with that of Descartes.

Spinoza denies what appears to be an uncontroversial assumption of Descartes's, that ideas, in themselves, are neither true nor false.

For Descartes, an idea is a mere representation.

Only judgments can be true or false.

In contrast, as we have seen, Spinoza thinks that all of our ideas are true.

Spinoza argues that every idea contains within itself an affirmation.

Ideas are not mere representations, but carry beliefs with them.

Descartes's view is that an idea is like a picture.

For sensory ideas, we have an image; for non-sensory ideas, we have a non-sensory representation.

We can either affirm or deny that our representation holds in reality.

Spinoza's claim that all our ideas are true thus differs from Descartes's claim that they can not be false.

While Descartes's assumption appeared uncontroversial, it does lead to the odd claim that we are free to choose whether or not to affirm a given belief.

In contrast, many philosophers hold what has come to be known as doxastic involuntarism: we can not choose what to believe.

('Doxa' is Greek for beliefs.)

Doxastic involuntarism is a compelling thesis: just try to believe that, say, your roommate is an alien from Venus.

Even if you are promised a reward for believing such a fact, or threatened with severe punishment, you can not believe it.

You can pretend to do so, but you can not sincerely do so.

Spinoza, rejecting Descartes's view, claims that our ideas are not neutral, but come with built-in beliefs.

I deny that a man makes no affirmation insofar as he has a perception. For what else is perceiving a winged horse than affirming wings of a horse? For if the mind should perceive nothing apart from the winged horse, it would regard the horse as present to it, and would have no cause to doubt its existence nor any faculty of dissenting, unless the imagining of the winged horse were to be connected to an idea which annuls the existence of the said horse, or he perceives that the idea which he has of the winged horse is inadequate (*Ethics* 2P49 Scholium, AW 186b-187a).

Thus, the default belief attached to any idea is an affirmation.

To deny that there is a winged horse, there must be another positive idea which crowds it out, which overrides our initial affirmation.

Spinoza's view that our ideas come with intrinsic beliefs gives us a reason to reject Descartes's claim that truth and falsity do not apply to ideas.

His claim is that even the most confused and inadequate idea has some measure of truth in it.

Even a fantastic idea, like a hallucination of a chimera, reflects a change in a mode of the one true substance, and so has at least a small measure of truth to it.

It is true at least in so far as we are thinking of it.

Thus, Spinoza believes that truth comes in degrees, and that our less-true ideas are, ideally, over-ridden by the more-true ones.

To begin my analysis of error, I should like you to note that the imaginations of the mind, looked at in themselves, contain no error; i.e., the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack the idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to itself (*Ethics* 2P17 Scholium, AW 173b).

Spinoza's view of beliefs highlights the problem of error.

The distinctions between levels of truth among our ideas get his solution started.

He has recast the problem from one of accounting for how we make mistakes to one of describing why some ideas are more true than others.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the German philosopher Alexius Meinong pursues this line of thought; Quine attacks it in "On What There Is."

IX.3. Passive and Active Ideas

Another aid to Spinoza's account of error relies on a distinction between passive and active ideas, and the freedom we have in our active minds.

As long as we are passive, we receive ideas from outside of us.

Those ideas are of bodies, as we saw above, and in 2P11, 2P12, and 2P13.

Ideas of bodies are inadequate, or mutilated, or confused.

They are confused especially because they are caused by the interaction of my body and other bodies.

Recall Descartes's discussion at the end of the Second Meditation: the wax brought him more knowledge about himself than it did about the wax.

The inadequacy of our understanding of wax and other objects outside of ourselves prevents us from excluding those overriding ideas which block them out.

For Spinoza, the inadequate ideas are not false, exactly; how could they be?

But, they are less true than the adequate ones.

They are governed by psychological associations, rather than by logical ones.

The distinction between active and passive ideas mirrors Spinoza's distinction between two ways to conceive of substance: *natura naturans*, or active nature, as God conceives himself; and *natura naturata*, or passive or generated nature, God as conceived through modes.

Spinoza has removed as much of the anthropocentric view of God as he could from Descartes's metaphysics. But, there are limits.

We are finite, and any account of the world and its structure will have to include us.

Spinoza includes us by making us part of God, considered in a finite mode.

IX.4. Inadequate and Adequate Ideas

We have seen that Spinoza claims both that all ideas have some truth, and that the ones that are active are more true than the ones that are passive.

Let's take a particular example of an idea which might be thought to contain an error.

Descartes considered two ideas we have of the sun: a sensory idea and one derived from reason.

He determined that the former is false, and the latter is true.

Spinoza, in contrast, thinks that both are true, to different degrees.

We do make an error, when we affirm that the sun is small, or not so far away, as it appears.

But that error is, properly speaking, just inadequacy, not falsity.

When we gaze at the sun, we see it as some two hundred feet distant from us. The error does not consist in simply seeing the sun in this way but in the fact that while we do so we are not aware of the true distance and the cause of our seeing it so. For although we may later become aware that the sun is more than six hundred times the diameter of the earth distant from us, we shall nevertheless continue to see it as close at hand. For it is not our ignorance of its true distance that causes us to see the sun to be so near; it is that the affection of our body involves the essence of the sun only to the extent that the body is affected by it (*Ethics* 2P35 Scholium, AW 178b).

[Indeed: the distance from the earth to the sun is more than ten thousand times the diameter of the earth.]

On the other hand, there are some stronger, clearer, and more adequate ideas.

Those things that are common to all things and are equally in the part as in the whole can be conceived only adequately (*Ethics* 2P38, AW 179a).

Common ideas are those that come from the use of reason, which is one of three kinds of knowledge Spinoza describes in 2P40 Scholium 2.

The other kinds are sensory, which Spinoza calls opinion or imagination, and intuition, which Spinoza says is the highest kind of knowledge (5P25, AW 189).

In this case, we can see Spinoza aligning with Descartes.

Descartes claims that what I called the Class III beliefs were free from errors of reliance on sense experience, from reliance on the resemblance hypothesis.

Class III beliefs are innate, and so secure.

Similarly, Spinoza claims that the common ideas are the result of reasoning, which does not rely on inadequate ideas received passively from outside of us.

These most-secure beliefs are active ideas that we discover ourselves.

They are governed by logical necessity, and they allow us to engage God.

The human mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God...and thus it is as inevitable that the clear and distinct ideas of the mind are true as that God's ideas are true (*Ethics* 2P43 Scholium, AW 182).

Primarily, the common notions concern pure geometry and philosophy, and knowledge of God.

IX.5. Determinism

It looks as if Spinoza is encouraging us to spend our time focusing on the adequate ideas, those which Descartes would have called clear and distinct.

Unfortunately, the situation can not be quite that simple.

According to Spinoza, we just lack the freedom to choose other than the way in which one chooses.

Everything is determined.

Spinoza criticizes Descartes for using the method of doubt, in part because he says that such doubt is impossible.

Again, we can not freely choose our beliefs.

We can only pretend to believe that we are dreaming, or deceived.

If Cartesian doubt is impossible, then no counsel against it could be effective or even appropriate.

Still, Spinoza defends a kind of freedom which arises from focusing on the active ideas.

For Spinoza, freedom is having a greater proportion of adequate ideas, so that one is more fully self-determining.

Since we can never have only active ideas, purely adequate, freedom, like truth, is a matter of degrees.

Even though our actions are determined, we can still strive (in some sense) to be free of our passions, our base desires.

Such striving leads us to a kind of eternity.

We can strive to be free by contemplating ourselves as finite modes in Nature.

The mind's intellectual love towards God is the love of God wherewith God loves himself not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explicated through the essence of the human mind considered under a form of eternity. That is, the mind's intellectual love towards God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself... From this we clearly understand in what our salvation or blessedness or freedom consists, namely, in the constant and eternal love towards God (*Ethics* 5P36, and Scholium, AW 191-2).

Spinoza, in the end, urges us to give up the commands of the passions, to free ourselves from our confused understanding, and to contemplate the eternal as a route to happiness.

He derives advice on how to live from the metaphysical and physical realities he has described.

While he phrases that advice in the language of love of God, the advice itself is not particularly religious.

Indeed, it echoes Plato's counsel away from the constraining and never-satisfying pleasures of the body, and toward philosophy and the love of knowledge.

[Here's something fun and sort of relevant: X-Phi on Free Will](#)