Spinoza on Relations

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*1. Introduction*

Unlike many of his medieval scholastic predecessors, and unlike his younger contemporary, Leibniz, Spinoza had little explicitly to say about relations -- their logic, epistemology, and ontology. This might seem surprising, as many recent commentators have profitably explored "Spinozistic" relations -- relations, such as 'conception', 'causation', and 'inherence', that Spinoza invokes in a characteristic way -- in elucidating features of his thought (see, e.g., Della Rocca (2008), Melamed (2012), and Newlands (2010)). Yet we should not ignore the significance that Spinoza assigned to relations *as such* in his metaphysical system. This significance is most visible in connection with Spinoza's discussion in his early works of relations as 'beings of reason' (*entia rationis*). In this chapter, I investigate Spinoza's understanding of relations in this domain. Relations, as beings of reason, function as mental heuristics for ordering and "explaining" existence but have no extramental existence and do not independently determine or structure the properties of things in the world. Relations thus occupy a shadowy place in Spinoza's metaphysics while they play a distinguished role in our mental lives and possess a complex epistemological status at the interface between being and its representation in the mind.

For early modern as well as present-day philosophers, the concept of relation is closely associated the concept of *universal*.The early moderns viewed the connection between relations and universals as arising from the way relations were implicated in the formation of universals, namely, through the comparison of singulars. Because this sort of comparison was regarded as resembling the way in which comparison induced relations like *taller than*, the metaphysical characteristics of relations and universals were thought to be akin (see Carriero (2015), 163 n. 6)*.* In striking contrast to this picture, I shall argue, Spinoza viewed relations and universals as substantially different in multiple respects. These differences, I shall argue, are rooted in the special way in which Spinoza regards relations – not universals – as embodying the characteristics of beings of reason as he conceives them. To expound this noteworthy point of view, I will attempt to disentangle Spinoza's concept of relations from his concept of universals.My objective is not directly to rule out universals as *entia rationis,* though I will suggest that there are grounds for regarding universals as a separate type of “metaphysical being.” Rather, my chief aim is to bring out how relations are more central to the nature of beings of reason than universals appear to be.

My focus shall be on two of Spinoza's early works, the *Short Treatise* (KV) and the *Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM). In section 2, I flesh out the profile of relations as beings of reason, specifically as suggested in these works. In section 3, I compare Spinoza's conception of universals and his conception of relations as articulated in this early period. I end in section 4 with some brief concluding remarks, gesturing toward Spinoza's mature conception of relations in the *Ethics*.

*2. Relations as Beings of Reason*

Reflecting what was standardly the case in medieval discussions of relations (see Brower (2018), §2.1), Spinoza's talk of relations is not confined to any one piece of Latin terminology (leaving aside expressions in Dutch). Significantly, the term '*relatio*' and its variants show up sparingly in Spinoza's talk about relations; associated notions like 'order' (*ordo*), 'respect' (*respectus*), and 'comparison' (*comparatio*) appear to occur more frequently. This datum is important to keep in mind in what follows, since it might be erroneously assumed that where translated passages do not contain the word 'relation', Spinoza is not speaking about relations. In the discussion that follows, by contrast, I construe talk of 'order', 'respect' and 'comparison' as talk about relation. Since, as we are about to see, these terms are integral to Spinoza's characterizations of the nature of beings of reason, it is natural and informative to posit an intimate connection between relations and beings of reason – or so I shall presently argue.

Before proceeding with this argument, let me foreground two crucial features of Spinoza’s concept of a ‘being of reason’. The first concerns the kinds of notions which Spinoza takes to qualify as such. Spinoza does not allude to such examples all in one place, but examining different passages in the CM reveals that the following notions are among those that count: *blindness, extremity or limit, term, darkness* (see G I/234/25-28), *opposition, order, agreement, difference, subject, adjunct,* etc. (see G I/245/1). The list contains notions "which the mind uses for negating" (G I/234/27), such as *extremity* and *limit*; notions denoting privation, such as *blindness* and *darkness*; and notions indicating relations, such as *opposition, order, agreement, difference,* etc. In dividing beings of reason into negations, privations, and relations Spinoza is channeling a standard conception of beings of reason found in scholastic philosophy, as witnessed, for example, in the work of Francisco Suárez (*Disputatio Metaphysica* 54, §3). The division is instructive for our purposes, for it clearly exhibits that, aside from conceptions of negation and privation, relations are constitutive of the notion of beings of reason. If it turns out that none of the above notions qualify as *universals*, this might be taken as evidence that relations have a role in Spinoza's metaphysics prima facie distinct from the role assigned to universals. This is the central prospect on which I hope to shed some light.

A second, profound, feature that Spinoza ascribes to *entia rationis* is their essential role in determining, not how objects are constituted in extramental reality, but rather how, or by what modes of thinking, we are apt to conceive such objects. Thus, Spinoza warns:

[W]e should carefully be on guard in the investigation of things, lest we confound real beings with beings of reason. For it is one thing to inquire into the nature of things, and another to inquire into the modes by which things are perceived by us. (CM I 1 | G I/235/30-37)

For Spinoza (in the early works we will be looking at), all characterizations of the nature of relations must advert to this basic premise about the proper, epistemically reflexive role of beings of reason. As the continuation of this passage implies, failure to appreciate this role threatens to undermine our understanding of, precisely, “the ways in which we apprehend nature” as well as “nature itself.” This indicates that the “modes by which things are perceived by us” are construed by Spinoza as the modes by which, through the representation of relations, we *rationally* perceive things. This admonition, then, would seem to relate distinctly to beings of *reason.* To anticipate, the chief lesson I shall draw from this sort of presupposition is that relations are markedly distinct from universals – confused representations -- in what the former reveal about the rational bearing of human cognition on the world.With these basic observations in place, let us see how Spinoza’s (early) account of relations unfolds.

Spinoza subsumes relations under the category of 'beings of reason' in multiple early texts. A concise and revealing passage on the character of relations as beings of reason occurs in KV I 10:

Some things [*dingen*] are in our intellect and not in Nature [*in ons verstand ... niet in de Natuur*], so that these are only our own work, and they help us to understand things distinctly [*onderscheidelijk ... verstaan*]. Among these we include all relations [*betrekkingen*], which have reference to different things. These we call *beings of reason* [*Entia Rationis*]. (KV I 10 | G I/49/5-8)

According to Spinoza in the KV, there can be no relations without an activity of the mind that helps us "to understand things distinctly [*onderscheidelijk ... verstaan*]." Although Spinoza doesn't spell out this notion of "understanding," it is plausibly interpreted as the ability not only to represent the notions of, say, left and right, but to identify *which* thing(s) are to the left or to the right of something else (cf. Geach (1957), 33, for an informative discussion of this view). As Spinoza intimates in KV I 10, attributions of relative goodness and evil cannot be made unless there is *something* that is perceived to instantiate either goodness or evil so that *it* can be compared with other things in this respect, which "respect" Spinoza defines as its perceived utility or desirability relative to something else -- an intrinsic property of neither thing. However, although it may, for Spinoza, be a necessary condition on grasping the concept of a relation that one have the capacity to recognize when particular things satisfy it, such recognition does not include the representation of the essence of any particular thing, because it doesn't necessarily involve being able to tell anything further definitive about each of the things related. In other words, the content of thoughts about relations derives from some observable respect in which the relevant objects, independently of their natures, can be brought into comparison(G I/235/30-I/236/5). On this account, then, relations, considered in their own right, never uncover the essences of things they relate, and thus never constitute the idea of a particular object, whether possible or necessary (see CM I 1 | G I/234/30).

This cardinal feature of Spinoza's conception of relations illuminates his frequent appeal to the relevant distinction between 'extrinsic' vs. 'intrinsic' denominations. Spinoza customarily associates relations with the notion of 'extrinsic denominations' (see, especially, TIE §101 | G II/36/32; see also CM II 2 | G I/252/29; E2d4, E3DeffAff48 | G II/203/22-24; Ep. 54 | G IV/252/30-32). As the scholastics understood the concept -- an understanding appropriated by Descartes (see AT VII 84ff. | CSM II 58) -- an 'extrinsic denomination' is a name given to a thing in virtue of its perceived relation(s) to something outside it (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, ch. 13, and Manning (2016), 276). An example of an extrinsic denomination would be that of the predicate that occurs in the sentence 'Joe Biden is *Vice President*'. *Vice President* is a name or designation that does not pertain to Biden's nature but applies to him in virtue of his perceived relations to other things, e.g. other people who occupy different positions in the governmental hierarchy.

The significance of the contrast between extrinsic and intrinsic denominations is that it allows Spinoza to express relationality -- and its definitive detachment from ideas that represent the natures of particular things -- in semantic terms. Spinoza's denial that relations have the status of ideas of the natures of existing objects can be viewed in light of the putative purchase of language on metaphysical reality. People, Spinoza says, confuse relations with ideas of real beings. He diagnoses this error as consisting in people's giving names to relations that are confusedly attributed to things, as if the relations existed outside the intellect. Because a thing's extrinsic denominations apply to it in virtue of the relations it stands to other things, *those relations themselves* are mistakenly regarded as *ideas* of that thing (as when we take *Vice President* and the manifold relations this notion implicates to form part of the *idea* of Joe Biden). In short, people "judge the things from the words," i.e. from extrinsic denominations, " not the words from the things" (G I/235/8-9) Thus, Spinoza can be seen to rely on the character of extrinsic denominations to express the crucial point that relations are not ideas of the natures of particular things.

Just as notable as this tenet of Spinoza’s account of relations is Spinoza’s distinctive view of relations as *purely* *heuristic* *representations* that govern the mind's comprehension of empirical reality. As beings of reason, relations enable us to "more easily *retain, explain, and imagine* the things we have understood [*ad res intellectas faciliùs* *retinendas, explicandas, atque imaginandas*]” about the features of empirical existence we represent (G I/233/31-32; emphasis in original). The notion of a mode of thought that does not represent the natures of objects, but embodies or expresses the way we comprehend the respects in which objects cohere with one another, may seem paradoxical, as far as the project of explanation is concerned. It need not seem so strange, however, if one takes a being of reason to *consist in* the *activity* of retaining, imagining, and explaining, as well as whatever representation results from the immediate *output of* such activity. This definition is suggested quite vividly in Spinoza's explanation of 'time' in CM I 4:

*What time is*

But to determine this duration, we compare it with the duration of other things which have a certain and determinate motion. *This comparison* is called *time* [*haecque comparatio tempus vocatur*]. Time, therefore, is not an affection of things, but only a mere mode of thinking, *or*, as we have already said, a being of reason. For it is a mode of thinking that serves to explain duration. (G I/244/23-32; emphasis in original)

Spinoza is careful here to avoid saying that a being of reason is properly speaking a mental representation *of* an object. Rather, the (or a) defining feature of a being of reason is that it "serves to explain" some feature of existence, in this case by comparing, or bringing into relation, the "certain and determinate motion" of one thing with that of other things "which have a certain and determinate motion." The result is a *heuristic* representation that gives us purchase on the way we grasp (empirical) existence, telling us – for example -- that, in relation to our perspective, one plant takes three times as long to bloom as another. The being of reason here is not the idea of either plant -- nor the idea of *planthood* -- but 'time', the measure -- *not* the idea --we apply to both. Such comparison falls short of illuminating the essences of the things compared, but it is useful and edifying in other ways, informing, for instance, our horticultural practices. In the case of Spinoza's elucidation of the notion of time, then -- which he appears to suggest as illustrative of the conception of 'being of reason' generally -- a being of reason is an act of comparison along with what emerges from such comparison as a kind of rational tool, a notion devoted to defining our representational bearings in the (empirical) world. Despite its being guided by reason in this way, however, the representation of a relation is tied to no one object and cannot be true or false (G I/235/18).

We can make more vivid and precise Spinoza’s notion of the characteristics of relations as beings of reason by holding that notion up against Kripke's famous example of the standard meter and the metaphysical and epistemological lessons Kripke draws from it. For Spinoza (as we have just seen), a good illustration of the nature of beings of reason is provided by spatiotemporal measurement, or the constructing of spatiotemporal relations. As all will agree, such measurement must be fixed in a manner that is not wholly fortuitous (or self-contradictory); yet, as many will also recognize, any system of measurement -- standard or not -- will in a fundamental way be arbitrary relative to the reality it measures. Thus, suppose that I arbitrarily single out a portion of my physical environment, a stick say, and declare,

(K) 'The length of stick *S*at time *t*0 is one meter.'

As Kripke (1980, 56-57) tells us, (K) is not a necessary truth (even if it is supposed to be a definition), for 'the length of *S* at time *t*0' does not give the *meaning* of 'meter' but rather "fixes the reference" of the latter term. Though the reference of 'meter' is fixed by the notion of 'the length of stick *S*at time *t*0,' the relation between *S* and the designation of one meter is arbitrary. For this reason, (K) expresses what Kripke famously called the 'contingent a priori': I know 'a priori' -- automatically, without further investigation -- that *S* is one meter long insofar as it was I who stipulated ('designated') that it is such; and yet the fact that *S* is one meter long is contingent because, even holding fixed the meter as a standard of measurement, it could have happened that *S* had a different length, even at *t*0.

Beings of reason are like meter sticks, for Spinoza. The relations we posit in explaining spatiotemporal existence -- the way we order or oppose things, for instance -- furnish us with knowledge of certain features of that existence *insofar as* we have used such relations to "fix" those features. Nevertheless, this practice has no bearing on the *nature* of the features it delineates, because nothing about the way the relevant features of existence have been fixed dictates *why* they should be fixed that way.

So, for Spinoza (in the KV and the CM), there is an element of arbitrariness in representations of relations; indeed, such arbitrariness is intrinsic to the way in which relations “explain” features of existence, as we saw in the case of duration. At this point, however, one might allege that such arbitrariness threatens or even undermines the aptness of such explanations: in what way can such representations of the world be perspicuous if they do not represent “the inmost essence of things”?

Spinoza could respond to this worry by saying that the perspicuity of such representations rests on the *clarity* that representations of relations possess in virtue of being thought of as tied to our perception of a given *circumstance*. Spinoza highlights the association between relations and circumstance in an important passage from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, where he contrasts proper knowledge of the essence of singular things with the understanding of things drawn from the relations in which they stand, a contrast we observed at the outset: "The essences of singular, changeable things are not to be drawn from their series, *or* order of existing, since it offers us nothing but extrinsic denominations, relations, or at most, circumstances, all of which are far from the inmost essence of things" (TIE §101 | G II/36/30-35; for a later statement of the connection of relation to circumstance, see E5p29s). Now it might be said that, insofar as representations of relations are attached to specific circumstances, their content is determined bythe way the world *is*.Thus, when we think (non-fictitiously) of two objects as related, we inevitably think of them as related in a real-world *context*. This context provides the setting of the mind’s comparison between two things and helps render the representation of the relation between those things *clear*, even though the ideas of the relata as independent beings remain obscure or imperfect.

To illustrate, consider the relation defined by the concepts of *laying an egg* and *an egg hatching* (the example is from Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding* II, xxv, 8). My representation of this relation will be clearer if it is couched as a relation between a female bird parent and her chick – these are objects *which* may be identified as satisfying or instantiating the former, more abstract relation. Further, the representation may be rendered still more lucid and precise if it is tied to the representation of the mother’s laying the egg and the egg hatching *in a certain setting*, say in a nest in a tree in the North End of Central Park. It could be said that the more precisely a relation is imagined as holding between objects in a certain circumstance, the more valuable and effective is its heuristic function, revealing how and to what extent features of existence may be organized and elucidated by us. Crucially, however – and this is a concession to the present worry about the perspicuity of representations of relation -- Spinoza would point out (in the same spirit we’ve witnessed all along) that no matter how acute is our perception of the *relation* between the mother bird and her chick, as well as of the circumstance to which that relation is tied, such a relation is – and must be -- compatible with having an obscure and imperfect idea of the natures of the *birds themselves.*

Considering the representational role of relations adumbrated above, what do we make of their ontological status? Does their relegation to the intellect as mere representations make them "a mere nothing" overall, as Spinoza puts it (G I/235/13)? Spinoza’s definitive response to this question holds true not only of relations but of universals (and in principle any form of abstracta): representations of relations (universals, etc.) are not entirely bereft of ontological status, insofar as they are *modes of thought*, something the mind can be "employed about," to use Locke's expression. Spinoza puts the point succinctly: “[I]f anyone looks outside the intellect for what is signified by those words ['being of reason'], he will find it to be a mere nothing. But if he means the modes of thinking themselves, they are indeed real beings” (CM I 1 | G I/235/13-16). By Spinoza's lights, a non-veridical representation is still a mode of thought, a mental entity, and in this precise sense it is not a mere nothing.

Before I conclude this section, let me raise, without resolving, a further worry concerning the role of arbitrariness in Spinoza’s account of relations. In the KV and the CM, Spinoza seems adamant that relations do not exist independently of the intellect. Insofar as they are the workmanship of the intellect, relations apply arbitrarily – though guided by reason (G I/236/13) -- to real objects. Although Spinoza builds a careful case for this view, one might simply ask why he feels obliged or entitled to hold it in the first place. My earlier comparison between Spinoza’s account of relations and Kripke's contingent a priori was intended to bring out how the relations we posit (when we measure things, for example) have no bearing on the natures of objects as they exist outside of thought. However, although Spinoza holds that there is an element of arbitrariness in representaitons of relations, it does not seem as if there is any such arbitrariness in the fact that one thing is, say, longer or taller than another. It does not just happen to be the case that Theaetetus is taller than Socrates in the way that it just happens to be the case that we use a certain stick as the standard for one meter. The worry here is that, although (e.g.) which particular system of measurement we adopt is arbitrary, not *all* relational truths are arbitrary.

This objection is interesting and on point, but I think that its force would not be recognized by Spinoza in this context. For the question of the arbitrariness of relational truths is not the chief concern of Spinoza’s account of relations in the KV and CM; rather, the concern in these texts is to treat relations in a way that convinces us not to reify them. Relations are supposed to contribute no being to reality *beyond* whatever form of reality is possessed by *our* cognitive relation to the world. Spinoza repeats this point numerous times in both the KV and the CM, and indeed this scruple would appear to be the principal take-away message of Spinoza’s early account of relations as beings of reason.

To summarize, then, we have seen that, for Spinoza in his early writings, (1) relations cannot be ideas of the *natures* of objects; (2) relations have a rational basis insofar as they provide a cognitive foundation for the explanation (or retention or imaginative appropriation) of empirical objects; and, finally, (3) relations, as beings of reason, are connected with, and distinguished by, some circumstance or context. As we are now about to see, these features are important in discerning the differences between relations and universals, a distinct kind of "metaphysical being" (E2p48s) – or so, in my view, the following discussion should imply.

*3. Relations vs. Universals*

It seems standard practice among commentators giving an account of Spinoza’s views about 'beings of reason' to posit similarities, rather than to probe differences, between relations and universals (see, e.g., Carriero (2015) and Newlands (2017)). While there is some textual justification for positing such similarity, I think there is stronger and more abundant evidence that Spinoza kept universals and relations apart, and that it was the latter which he regarded as constitutive of his conception of beings of reason. In this section I present a limited assortment of textual evidence for the view that Spinoza regarded relations as a distinguished sort of mental being.

*Ethics* 2p40s offers what is perhaps Spinoza's most representative characterization of the nature and origin of universals. (E2p40s is consistent with Spinoza's early characterization of universals: see KV I 2 | G I/32/33-I/33/4 and the bit of text immediately preceding. Notably, this passage from the KV *contrasts* the notion of a universal with the notion of a 'whole', described as a being of reason; the passage is complex and worth exploring, but I do not have space to do so here.) I quote E2p40s at length:

[1] Those notions they call *Universal*, like Man, Horse, Dog, etc., have arisen ... because so many images (e.g. of men) are formed at one time in the human Body that they [2] surpass the power of imagining -- not entirely, of course, but still to the point where the Mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular [men] (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and [3] imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body. For the body has been affected most [NS: forcefully] by [what is common], since each singular has affected it [by this property]. And [NS: the mind] expresses this by the word *man*, and [4] predicates it of infinitely many singulars. For as we have said, it cannot imagine a determinate number of singulars.

But it should be noted [5] that these notions are not formed by all [NS: men] in the same way ... For example, those who have more often regarded men's stature with wonder will understand by the word *man* an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men -- e.g., that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal. (G II/121/12-32)

I shall outline some differences between Spinoza's conception of universals and his conception of relations as beings of reason by attending to the individual points in this passage marked by the bracketed numbers I have inserted above. Let us start with [1] (in conjunction with [4]).

[1, 4] Universals are representations, or predications, of (infinitely many) particulars; the objects of universals are ultimately the ideas of singular things -- modes-- that can or (necessarily) do exist. Relations, by contrast, "have no object that exists necessarily, or can exist" and hence are not ideas of things (G I/234/31-32).

[2] Universals surpass the power of imagining; beings of reason are formed as aids to

the imagination (CM I 1 | G I/233/32, G I/234/17-28; CM I 5 | G I/245/1-16).

[3] Universals represent things without distinction; relations, as beings of reason, involve the representation of things as distinct (although both universals and beings of reason arise from the mind's being affected in some way) (KV I 5 | G I/49/5-6).

[5] Universals are not formed by individuals in the same way -- the representations that constitute universals are rooted in the idiosyncratic experience of each individual. Controversies involving appeal to universals arise from differences in "the disposition of [one's] brain" (E1App | G II/82/33). By contrast, misrepresentation of (with) beings of reason has less to do with individual idiosyncrasy and more to do with improperly distinguishing the beings of reason from real beings (see, e.g. Ep. 12 | G IV/58).

Two points of elucidation concerning [1] are in order.

*(i)* First, it is worth noting the clear contrast in the types of notions Spinoza labels as universals from the list he gives of beings of reason in CM, as I hinted at in the beginning. In E2p40s, paradigmatic examples of universals include "Man, Horse, Dog, etc." In the CM, as we saw, examples of beings of reason include the relational notions of *opposition, order, agreement, difference, subject, adjunct,* etc. (see G I/245/1). Names like 'man', 'dog', and 'horse' (as well as, e.g., 'perfection' and 'imperfection' (E4pref | G II/207/19)) are formed by a process of abstraction from a con*-fusion* of representations, to which we apply a kind of taxonomical term. However, such a term -- as the list of features of universals just adumbrated implies -- expresses only how our cognition relates *confusedly* to the world, failing to represent features of the world that we *distinctly* represent. By contrast, the notions listed as beings of reason in the CM pick out different ways in which existing things are kept distinct -- not conflated -- through comparison.

As I suggested above, this might be the precise basis for categorizing relations as beings of *reason*, to the exclusion of universals which are subject not to the guidance of reason but to the capricious workings of the imagination. In short, relations, as beings of reason, embody how our representations relate rationally to the world, whereas universals, I submit, form a distinct kind of “metaphysical being” born of the adventitious effects of objects on the imagination, the result of such impingement being the warped and indeterminate representation of empirical reality by the mind (E2p40s). It might be said that, crucially, though Spinoza is interested in uncovering how the mind apprehends empirical reality both confusedly and perspicuously (as evidenced by, for example, his discussion of the three types of knowledge in E2p40s2, directly following his account of the nature and origin of universals), insofar as he is concerned with the *investigation* of nature, he is distinctly concerned with the nature of relations and what they reveal about the character of the mind’s relation to the world.

*(ii)*  Second, I should mention one passage (discussed at length by Carriero (2015)) which might seem to run counter to my thesis that Spinoza regards relations, as beings of reason, as importantly distinct from universals. In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza uses the term "*Being of Reason*" to gloss the notion of the "the Will" as "only an Idea of this or that volition" (KV II 16 | G I/83/3-5). This might seem like evidence that Spinoza regards universals as beings of reason, and this might be taken as indirect evidence that relations too may involve having *ideas* of (the nature of) particular things (e.g. "this or that volition").

However, I think any appearance of inconsistency with my account can be explained away. To begin with, Spinoza in the same passage also calls the idea of the will a "fiction" (G I/83/6). However, in the *Metaphysical Thoughts* (a work written later than the KV) Spinoza distinguishes beings of reason from *both* universals (see G I/234/30-I/235/2) *and* fictions (see G I/236/6-21). This suggests that the KV passage may simply be an expression of a view that Spinoza later abandoned. Second, having an "idea" of "this or that volition" seems to be a way of putting things that is compatible with Spinoza's view that bringing things into relation involves identifying a *respect* in which two things -- whose natures do not thereby form the *content* of the mind's representation -- stand in relation. This could involve discerning how a thing *x* displays or expresses a volition or action, *v*, that differs in respect of how a thing *y* does not express *v* or does so to a lesser extent. This need not involve having an idea of the nature of either *x* or *y*, *nor* does it involve reifying *v* and subsuming it under the abstract idea of the *will*, such subsumption being characteristic of the formation of a universal.

*4. Concluding Remarks*

By way of concluding, let me briefly remark on the relevance of a further domain of Spinoza's thought about relations. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that finite beings (modes) that fall under an attribute of substance are conceptually relat*ed* because their natures are conceived through the same attribute (see E1p10&s, E2p6d). Modes that have an attribute in common can therefore stand in determinate relat*ions* with each other. By contrast, modes that have 'nothing in common' with one another due to their belonging to different attributes (see E1a5, E1p3) cannot enter into such relations because their natures are not (conceptually) related (as is the case between, e.g. mental and physical modes), and hence cannot be understood (*intelligi*) through one another (1a5).

In this context, if I am right, relations are *not* describable as beings of reason. This is because such relations are formed based on the (shared) *natures* of modes insofar as they fall under a certain attribute. Yet (ideas of) the *natures* of things are irrelevant, as we saw, to the way relations figure as beings of reason. We have witnessed one sense of what 'to explain' (*explicare*) means in the context of Spinoza's discussion of beings of reason in the early works. Perhaps one thing this discussion indicates is that Spinoza's notion of 'explanation' differs as between these early works and the *Ethics*,where the notion of explanation is tied to truth and essence (see, e.g., E1p4d, E2p5). Moreover, it is an interesting question whether Spinoza's characteristically *explanatory* relations posited the *Ethics*, principally *causation, conception,* and *inherence*, would count as *relations* judging by the view of the KV and the CM. If these considerations are apt, then there is perhaps *no one* concept of relation that can encompass all the characterizations Spinoza gives across his works of relations and all he says or implies about their place in his ontology. Evidently, what Spinoza explicitly says about relations as connected with their status as beings of reason is not all there is to his take on relations.

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