

12 The Power of Reason in Spinoza¹

In the preface to Part 5 of the *Ethics* Spinoza promises to explain “the power of the mind, or of reason” and to “show, above all, how great its dominion over the affects is, and what kind of dominion it has for restraining and moderating them.” This is an important task because of the ethical significance that Spinoza accords to reason. For example, Spinoza writes,

Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being . . . by the guidance of reason. (4p24)

In other words, Spinoza identifies acting virtuously with acting rationally. Spinoza also identifies acting by the guidance of reason and freedom:

we . . . easily see what the difference is between a man who is led only by an affect, or by opinion, and one who is led by reason. For the former, whether he will or no, does those things he is most ignorant of, whereas the latter complies with no one’s wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be the most important in life, and therefore desires very greatly. Hence, I call the former a slave, but the latter, a free man. (4p66s)

Moreover, Spinoza claims,

There is no singular thing in nature that is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason. (4p35c1)

According to Spinoza, this fact constitutes the rational foundation (and hence, owing to his identification of virtue and reason, the moral foundation) of society and political alliance: rational people are very useful to us and therefore it is in our interest to bind them to us by means of social and political alliances. It also provides us with a reason to be interested in the virtue and freedom of others. Because other people are most useful to us when they are rational, and to the extent that they are

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rational they are *ipso facto* both virtuous and free, it is in our interest to promote the virtue and freedom of others. In other words, this fact forms part of the rational and moral basis of benevolence.

Being rational, and hence being virtuous and free, is not, for Spinoza, merely a matter of consistency, revising belief according to certain rules, or maximizing expected utility. It is a matter of loving the right objects. When someone loves external things like wealth, honor, or sensual pleasure, she is irrational, and many other passions spring from such irrational loves (TdIE; G II, 6). The problem with these external goods is that possession of them depends upon fortune and so love of them breeds insecurity and anxiety. As Spinoza writes,

For no one is disturbed or anxious concerning anything unless he loves it, nor do wrongs, suspicions, and enmities arise except from love for a thing which no one can really fully possess. (5p2os)

Reason countenances only love of something internal to us. More specifically, insofar as we are rational, we love only intellectual perfection. Spinoza writes,

In this life . . . it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, or reason. In this one thing consists man's highest happiness, or blessedness. Indeed, blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind that stems from the intuitive knowledge of God. But perfecting the intellect is nothing but understanding God, his attributes, and his actions, which follow from the necessity of his nature. So the ultimate end of the man who is led by reason, that is, his highest desire, by which he strives to moderate all the others, is that by which is led to conceive adequately both himself and all things which can fall under his understanding. (4app)

Unfortunately, reason is not the only force that motivates and guides our behavior. It is in competition with the passions, which often push us to act in ways that conflict with the dictates of reason. Clearly, then, if we wish to understand the conditions under which we can live free and virtuous lives, which are beneficial to both ourselves and our fellows, we will do well to understand the conditions under which reason can moderate and restrain the affects. Spinoza claims no innovations here. According to him, the remedies for the affects discussed in Part 5 are "known to everyone by experience." His aim is rather to provide a rational account of those remedies. Because it is better to be rational than not, it is better to have a rational account of the power of the mind over the passions than to know that power by mere experience.

In the preface to Part 5 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza wishes to make clear that he does not believe that the power of reason over the passions is

absolute. It is not merely a matter of exercising our free will appropriately as, for example, the Stoics taught. Rather, there are conditions under which reason is more powerful than the passions and conditions under which the opposite is true. Furthermore, these conditions are not fully under our control and depend, at least in part, on fortune. Nevertheless, Spinoza's attitude toward the power of reason is fundamentally optimistic. He believes that, once the seed of reason is planted, there is a natural tendency for its power to grow relative to the power of the passions so that, assuming minimally favorable conditions, reason will eventually come to dominate. Spinoza describes his own moral and intellectual development as exhibiting this tendency:

And although in the beginning these intervals [of rationality] were rare, and lasted a very short time, nevertheless, after the true good became more and more known to me, the intervals became more frequent and longer – especially after I saw that the acquisition of money, sensual pleasure, and esteem are only obstacles so long as they are sought for their own sakes, and not as means to other things. (TdE § 11; G II, 7–8)

The remedies for the passions discussed in Part 5 of the *Ethics* are supposed to be the mechanisms that explain this natural tendency toward greater rationality.

I. SPINOZISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Before the investigation of reason's power over the passions, it will be useful to set out some of the rudiments of Spinozistic psychology. According to Spinoza, a human being can be conceived in two ways: under the attribute of thought and under the attribute of extension (the principal attribute of body). Insofar as we conceive of a human being under the attribute of thought, we conceive of him or her as a mind. Insofar as we conceive of a human being under the attribute of extension, we conceive of him or her as a body. The human mind, according to Spinoza, is the complex idea that represents the human body (2p13). What about the external world? Doesn't it represent that too? Spinoza agrees that we have ideas that represent the world outside of us, but he believes that we do so in virtue of possessing ideas of parts of our bodies, the states of which express states of the external world. Whenever a part of the body is in a particular state because of the influence of an external cause, that state expresses that external cause. Thus in having an idea of such a part, we have an idea of something that expresses that external cause. The idea of that which expresses, Spinoza believes, also represents that which is expressed (2p16).

The human body is a complex individual made of parts that are themselves bodies (2p01). According to a doctrine that is often called "Spinoza's parallelism," for every body there is an idea that represents it and vice versa. Moreover, the order and connection of bodies is the same as the order and connection of ideas (2p7). So for every part of the body, there is a part of the mind (i.e., an idea) that represents that part of the body.² Alternatively, by dint of Spinoza's mind-body identity theory, every part of a human being can be conceived of as an idea or as a body (2p7s).

Another important element of Spinoza's psychology is his claim that the will and the intellect are one and the same thing (2p49c). By this he means that every idea has two dimensions: one representational and one conative or volitional. That is, every idea represents some body or bodies and every idea determines some action of the mind. In particular, it determines the mind to act as if its representational content were true. In other words, every idea both represents some state of affairs and affirms that it obtains. On this view, every idea is belief-like.³ The actions of the mind produced by an idea are those which such a belief naturally produces given the desires of the agent.

This brings us to Spinoza's theory of desire. According to him, each finite thing strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its being (3p6). This striving or *conatus* is the essence of the finite thing. The essence of a thing determines its causal powers. So the *conatus* of each thing determines its causal powers. Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, produces those effects that conduce to its survival. Spinoza defines action in terms of causation: a thing acts insofar as it causes things to happen. So the *conatus* makes each thing, insofar as it is in itself, act in a way that conduces to its survival. That is, our *conatus* moves us to perform those actions of which we are capable and that would be conducive to our survival if the world were as our minds represent it.

In the preceding discussion of Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine, we have said that each thing strives to persevere in its being insofar as it is in itself. What does "insofar as it is in itself" [*quantum in se est*] mean?

² Does Spinoza mean to claim that everyone has, for example, an idea of every molecule in his or her pancreas? Yes, but, generally speaking, such ideas possess very little power to affect our mental life and thus intrude little if at all into our consciousness. See Garrett 2008.

³ I say that they are belief-like rather than that they are beliefs because whether or not they play the psychological role associated with beliefs depends upon the content and power of other ideas contained in the mind. For example, if the mind contains other ideas opposed to a given idea *i*, and if they are collectively more powerful than *i*, then *i* will not guide the action of the agent. In other words, it will not play the belief-role.

What does it mean for one thing to “be in” or to “inhere in” something? The inherence relation is coextensive, for Spinoza, with causation.⁴ So, insofar as something is in itself or inheres in itself, it is caused by itself. Only substances are, strictly speaking, caused by themselves, but modes can approximate self-causation to the extent that their existence and activity is not conditioned by external causes.⁵ The more a finite mode’s existence and activity is conditioned by external causes, the less it inheres in itself. Likewise, the less a finite mode’s existence and activity are conditioned by external causes, the more it inheres in itself. Insofar as a finite mode’s existence and activity are not conditioned by external causes, it will act in a self-preservative way.

But what can we say about the activity of finite modes insofar as they don’t inhere in themselves, that is, insofar as external causes condition their existence and activity? To that extent, their activity reflects the *conatus* or essence of those external causes. Because each finite mode is influenced by external causes, many of its actions will be determined partially by its own nature and partially by the nature of its external causes (4p5). Consequently, the behaviors that externally caused ideas motivate will be partially self-preserving and partially directed to the benefit of the external modes that cause them. Because what helps others often harms oneself, externally caused ideas can easily motivate self-harming behaviors.

So now we know that the *conatus* doctrine says that, by its very essence, each thing, insofar as it is not influenced by external causes, will produce those effects of which it is capable and that conduce to its survival. Our next question is, what is survival? The answer derives from Spinoza’s account of complex individuality. Let’s start with Spinoza’s account of the individuality of complex bodies, because Spinoza develops his account of complex individuality in terms of bodies. In virtue of the parallelism, we will easily be able to extend this account to the complex individuality of minds.

A complex individual body such as the human body comprises, according to Spinoza, a diversity of parts, each of which communicates its motion and rest to the others according to a fixed pattern (*ratio*).⁶ A body is destroyed just in case its erstwhile parts no longer communicate their motions to each other according to the pattern that defines the complex body. A complex body survives just in case this pattern

⁴ Spinoza thinks that inherence is coextensive with conception (see the use of 1d3, 1d5, and 1a1 in 1p4d). And he thinks that conception and causation are coextensive (see 1a4 and 1p25d). These two together entail that inherence and causation are coextensive.

⁵ See Garrett 2002 and also Lin 2004.

⁶ Definition following axiom 2” of Part 2.

is maintained. So a complex body produces those effects of which it is capable and that conduce to the preservation of the pattern of motion and rest that defines it (3p6, 4d1, and 4p39).

Similarly, a complex individual idea such as the human mind comprises, according to Spinoza, a diversity of simpler ideas. Ideas, of course, don't move, and so Spinoza's account of their individuality cannot be in terms of their parts communicating their motions to each other according to a fixed pattern of motion and rest. There must be then some other kind of *psychological* pattern that ideas must realize in order for them to jointly constitute a single complex idea. Just what kind of psychological pattern is this? Spinoza's answer can be discerned in his word for pattern, "ratio," which in Latin means both pattern and reason. The mind strives to preserve its rationality. Rationality is the psychological pattern that defines the existence of the mind.

2. REASON AND PASSION

With the rudiments of Spinoza's psychology in place, we are now in a position to understand Spinoza's account of reason and the passions. Reason is, as I claimed above, a pattern obtaining between ideas. But is more than this. It also pertains to the character of the ideas themselves. In 4p26, Spinoza tells us that "the essence of reason is nothing but our mind insofar as it understands clearly and distinctly [*rationis essentia nihil aliud est quam mens nostra quatenus clare et distincte intelligit*]." I take this to be Spinoza's somewhat confusing way of saying that the mind is rational insofar as it clearly and distinctly understands. Clear and distinct understanding is the result of possessing adequate ideas. This is what Spinoza has in mind when he writes in 2d4, "By adequate idea I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations of a true idea." Here Spinoza defines adequate ideas as those ideas that possess the intrinsic properties possessed by all and only true ideas. Those intrinsic properties are clarity and distinctness. So "the essence of reason is nothing but our mind insofar as it clearly and distinctly understands" means that the mind is rational insofar as it possesses adequate ideas.

We know from 2d4 that an idea is adequate just in case it is true, but this makes the characterization of rationality given in 4p26 quite puzzling. It would follow that rationality and truth are coextensive. This might appear to be an odd result. It would seem that people are frequently rational in believing falsehoods and irrational in believing truths. For example, Newton was no doubt rational in believing in his physics, although it was false, and the lucky and optimistic lottery

winner who believed that she would win prior to the drawing was irrational, although her belief was true. But these are not really counterexamples to Spinoza's claim. Spinoza's topic is reason itself apart from any input from sense experience. We may deem it rational to believe the testimony of the senses, but we do not come to believe it through reason alone. In other words, it is sometimes rational to accept the deliverances of faculties other than reason. Spinoza believed, as did many of his epoch, that reason in itself is infallible and that whenever one commits an error in reasoning, inputs from the external environment – be it in the form of sense experience, imagination, or some other kind of external cause – are to blame. His justification for this belief can be found in his account of adequate ideas.

To understand Spinoza's theory of adequate ideas, we must start with his theory of ideas in general. Every idea is a mode of God insofar as he is a thinking thing: an idea is God insofar as he thinks of this or that (2p2). The human mind is, as discussed earlier, the idea of the human body. So the human mind is an idea in the mind of God: the human mind is God insofar as he thinks about the human body (2p11c). The human mind is also complex; it is composed of many simpler ideas (2p15). Each of these constituent ideas is also an idea in the mind of God. God is omniscient. All of his ideas are adequate (2p32 and 2d4). But human minds are prone to ignorance and error. Many of our ideas are inadequate. If each of our ideas is numerically identical to one of God's ideas and God has only adequate ideas, how can the human mind contain inadequate ideas? The answer is that adequacy is a relation to a mind. Some ideas that are adequate relative to God's mind are inadequate relative to a human mind.⁷ An idea is inadequate in the human mind just in case God possesses that idea in virtue of possessing not only the idea that is the human mind but also some other idea that is not part of the human mind (2p28). An idea is adequate just in case God does not possess it partially in virtue of possessing some idea other than the human mind. What kind of ideas are in the human mind but not possessed by God solely in virtue of possessing the idea that is the human mind? For any finite mode, God is the cause of that mode not in virtue of his absolute nature but rather in virtue of being affected by some other finite mode (1p28). In other words, finite modes of God are caused by other finite modes of God. So God does not possess any finite idea *i* solely in virtue of possessing *i*. That is, his possession of *i* is not unconditional. It is a condition on his possessing *i* that he possesses infinitely many finite ideas distinct from *i* that form the causal chain that terminates

⁷ This claim is forcefully defended in Della Rocca (1996a). My account of Spinoza's theory of adequate ideas owes much to Della Rocca's treatment.

in *i*. If *i* is also an idea in a human mind, then *i* is not adequate relative to that mind. It would be adequate in the human mind if the human mind possessed the idea of the whole causal chain that terminates in *i*, but this is impossible, because that chain is infinite and the human mind is finite.

What this comes to in the end is that an idea is inadequate relative to the human mind just in case the human mind possesses that idea partially in virtue of causal inputs from its environment. An idea is adequate just in case the human mind possesses it independent of any causal inputs from the environment.

Given this account of adequacy, it would appear impossible for any human mind to possess any adequate idea. The human mind is finite; hence all of its constituent ideas are finite. God does not possess any finite idea unconditionally. Therefore, God possess every idea possessed by the human mind only insofar as he possesses infinitely many finite ideas not contained in the human mind. There are a number of interpretative and philosophical issues that surround this question. A comprehensive treatment of them lies outside of the scope of this paper. It will be useful, nevertheless, to say a few words about how Spinoza believes that we can possess adequate ideas.

According to Spinoza, the human mind is capable of possessing ideas of the common properties of things (2p38). All modes of a given attribute have something in common, that is, the attribute of which they are modes and the properties that follow from the nature of the attribute (2p13le2). (For example, motion and rest are properties that follow from the nature of the attribute of extension.) Are the ideas that represent these common properties adequate or inadequate in the human mind? First of all, God's possession of the idea of any attribute is unconditional, and his idea of any mode that follows unconditionally from the nature of the attribute is conditional only upon possessing the idea of the attribute. Now Spinoza believes that every mode possesses an idea of the attribute of which it is an attribute (2p38c). It does so only in virtue of its own nature, that is, in virtue of being a mode of its attribute. Consequently, the possession of the idea of the attributes of which one is a mode is not conditional upon anything outside oneself. So the ideas of the attributes of thought and extension must be adequate in the human mind. In other words, God would need to possess no idea other than the idea that constitutes, for example, the human mind in order to have an idea of the attribute of thought. Moreover, the idea of anything which follows from that attribute would also be adequate in the human mind. One need possess no idea other than the idea of the attribute, for example, of extension in order to possess the idea of motion and rest, which is something that follows from the nature of the attribute. Thus God's

possession of the idea of the human body alone would entail his possession of the idea of motion and rest.

In addition to ideas of common properties, Spinoza believes that each mind contains an adequate idea of the eternal and infinite essence of God (2p45, 2p46, 2p47). This is because each thing, as a mode of God, inheres in God and so cannot be conceived without God. So the idea of each thing involves the idea of God, regardless of whether it is “considered as a part or as a whole,” and so is adequate (2p46d). So every mind contains a spark of rationality insofar as it is endowed with an adequate idea of God’s eternal and infinite essence. This is a surprising thesis. According to a widespread picture, no one, not even the wisest or most virtuous, can have any idea of God’s essence in this life. Only after death is such knowledge possible. But according to Spinoza, not only the wise and virtuous possess this idea, but so do the fool and the knave. Indeed, so do rocks and insects! But Spinoza believes that in most minds, the power of this idea is very slight and, to the extent that it possesses any power at all, it is overwhelmed by the contrary force of various passions.⁸ So, although an adequate idea of the essence of God is possessed by all, most are only dimly conscious of it and it does little to determine their thought and action.⁹

Moreover, the ideas that follow from an adequate idea are themselves adequate. The essences of singular things follow from the essence of God. So, because we have an adequate idea of God, if we deduce from that essence an idea of the essence of a singular thing, that idea too will be adequate. Likewise, any idea that we can deduce from the ideas of the common properties of things will also be adequate.

I stated earlier that Spinoza identifies rationality, virtue, and freedom. Here are his systematic grounds for doing so. Spinoza defines goodness as that which helps us persevere in our being (4d4). That which is good for each is that which helps him or her persevere in being. Goodness is thus a relative concept. Virtue is that state of character that most conduces to self-preservation (4p20). What follows from a thing’s essence is always consistent with its continued existence (3p6). Destructive forces are always external. To the extent that anything performs self-destructive behaviors, this is only on account of the external causes of its states.

We have seen that Spinoza thinks that it is the essence of the mind to be rational. So rationality is the state that is most conducive to

⁸ That is not to say that rocks and insects don’t appear to think about God because they are so passionate. Rather, in them, the power of their ideas is so slight that they scarcely think at all.

⁹ See Garrett 2008.

self-preservation, that is, is virtue (4p23 and 4p28). We are free so long as our actions follow from our natures alone and are not partially determined by an external force. So we are free to the extent that we are rational. Rational ideas are of common properties, God, and the things deduced from the ideas of those. So to have such ideas is to be virtuous and free. Because all things inhere in and are conceived through God, knowledge of God is the highest good. Such knowledge helps us know more and more things.

Passions are defined by Spinoza as inadequate ideas that register an increase or decrease in our power of acting (3p1 and 3p3). Inadequate ideas are those ideas that have inputs from the external environment. This definition resonates with the etymology of "*passione*," the Latin word for passion, which derives from the verb "*passio*," which means to suffer or to undergo. Suffering and undergoing suggest passivity. According to Spinoza, we act when we are the cause of what we do. That is, the causes of our changes of state are within us. Insofar as we fall under the attribute of thought, the causes of what we do are entirely within us when they are adequate ideas. So we are passive when the causal chain that terminates in what we do leads outside of us to the external environment. In other words, we are passive when we suffer passions, that is, possess inadequate ideas.

It would be a mistake to identify passions with the kind of mental states typically denoted by the word "emotion." Passions, in Spinoza's terminology, include more than the kind of upheavals of jealousy, anger, fear, and the like with their concomitant physical flashes, flushes, and throbs, commonly associated with the term "emotion." Passions are also responsible for determining the ends of the less-than-rational agent. They enter into deliberation and planning in a way in which mere emotions might not. For example, the love of the empty and futile goods pursued by the ordinary person – honor, wealth, and sensual pleasure – is a matter of passion. Love of these things is not merely a feeling that washes over a person only to fade once calm resumes. Rather, love of these things structures the lives of those who pursue them. More violent and fleeting passions such as jealousy, shame, pride, and rage arise, typically because the pursuit of honor, wealth, or sensual pleasure has been hindered or helped.

To summarize Spinoza's view of the place of reason and passion in our lives: love of honor, wealth, money, or anything external is a passion that sets us off in pursuit of empty and futile things. To be sure, there are passions that do not depend upon love for external things, such as pain and sadness. But Spinoza thinks that love of external things is a particularly important source of passions in that they establish ends the pursuit of which generates further passions through its success

or frustration (5p20s). The greatest happiness and virtue lies in giving up the desire for such things and living a life devoted to intellectual perfection, that is, pursuit of rational ideas. This pursuit revolves around the study of nature, including human nature, and – through the study of nature – intellectual love of God (5p15). But it is no easy thing to give up the love of honor, wealth, and pleasure. Such passions can be very powerful and, through that power, they can come to dominate the lives of those that they afflict. In the next section, I shall discuss Spinoza's views on the nature and extent of the power of the passions.

3. THE POWER OF PASSION OVER REASON

We are often torn between acting rationally – that is, virtuously and freely – and succumbing to our passions. Unfortunately, when such conflicts arise, frequently the passions triumph and we act against our better judgment.

As noted earlier, Spinoza has no patience for voluntaristic theories that hold that it is ultimately up to us whether to obey our passions or our rational ideas when they conflict. Whether reason or passion prevails depends entirely upon the relative power of the rational and passionate ideas at issue. What determines the power of an idea? The power of a rational idea is determined by its essence (3p7). The power of a passion is a function of the essence of the affected idea and the power of the external cause that affects it (4p5). These factors alone determine the power of an idea. If a rational idea is more powerful than a passion to which it is opposed, then it will restrain it. If, however, the passion is more powerful, it will overwhelm its rational rival. We have, in other words, no immediate control over whether we will be directed by our rational ideas or by our passions. The matter is decided by the differential powers of the ideas in question.

What is more, there is a psychological law that, under certain circumstances, can tilt the field to the advantage of passions over rational ideas opposed to them:

A desire which arises from true cognition of good and evil, insofar as this cognition concerns the future, can be quite easily restrained or extinguished by a desire for the pleasures of the moment. (4p16)

Spinoza here describes something familiar to all of us. Often we find ourselves in a situation where two incompatible courses of action present themselves to us. One of them would result in a greater

overall benefit¹⁰ than the other, but it requires that we wait. The second would result in a benefit that is inferior but can be enjoyed immediately. For example, such a choice might be faced by the student who must choose between conviviality now and failing the exam tomorrow or studying now and passing the exam tomorrow. Spinoza believes that the interval of time that we imagine separates us from the rewards we seek diminishes the power of our desire for it to motivate our action relative to desires whose satisfaction would be imminent or even merely closer. That imagined interval acts as a weight that impedes the expression of that desire in action. Even if our ideas of the more distant good are rational (that is, involve a true cognition of good and evil) and the desires for immediate gratification are irrational passions, this weight still counters the force of the desire for goods in the more distant future.

4. THE POWER OF REASON OVER THE PASSIONS

As we have seen, Spinoza has grounds for pessimism: Victory in the struggle between passion and reason depends upon the relative power of the rational ideas and passions in conflict. This in turn depends upon the internal resources of the agent and the power of the external forces that determine her passions. How they stack up is largely a product of fortune. What is more, as we have seen, there is a powerful psychological law that can easily favor passion over reason. And yet despite all this, Spinoza does not think that sometimes reason wins, sometimes it loses: it all comes down to how the cards are dealt. On the contrary, Spinoza thinks that, as described in the opening lines of the TdIE, where Spinoza putatively describes his own intellectual and moral development, there is a powerful tendency for reason, once its seed has taken root, to grow ever more powerful. In 5p20, Spinoza summarizes the remedies for the passions that he delineates in the preceding propositions. These are the mechanisms that explain this tendency. He writes:

From this it is clear that the power of the mind over the affects consists:

- I. In the knowledge itself of the affects (see 5p4s);
- II. In the fact that it separates the affects from the thoughts of an external cause, which we imagine confusedly (see 5p2 and 5p4s);

¹⁰ That is, the benefit is greater, even discounting for the uncertainty of the future.

III. In the time by which the affections related to things we conceive confusedly, or in a mutilated way (see 5p7);

IV. In the multiplicity of causes by which affections related to common properties and to God are encouraged (see 5p9 and 5p11);

V. Finally, in the order by which the mind can order its affects and connect them to one another (see 5p10 and in addition 5p12, 5p13, and 5p14).

In what follows, I shall offer interpretations and evaluations of each of these five, plus an additional technique that Spinoza oddly passes over here, that is, understanding things as necessary.

4.1. In the Knowledge Itself of the Affects

In 5p3, Spinoza claims that

An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.

This appears to state a version of the appealing idea that we can master our passions through self-knowledge. More specifically, coming to have knowledge of our passions allows us to defeat them. Indeed, various forms of psychotherapy seem to presume something very much like it. But what is the basis of its appeal and is it indeed so? Let us look at Spinoza's grounds for holding it: Passions are inadequate. Clear and distinct ideas are adequate. The idea of an idea, Spinoza seems to think, is not a different entity than the idea it represents (2p21, 2p21s, and 5p3d). No idea is both adequate and inadequate. So if we succeed in forming an adequate idea of a passion, Spinoza reasons, it ceases to be a passion. But how can we do so? An idea is inadequate just in case one of its causes is outside of the mind. An idea is adequate just in case all of its causes are inside of the mind. If an idea has a cause outside of the mind, is there anything I could do to change that? Of course not. As Bennett (1984, 336) puts the point, I could no more accomplish that than I could make myself a royal by changing who my parents are.

Perhaps what Spinoza has in mind is not an impossible change in an idea's causal origins but a change in the causes that currently sustain the existence of an idea.¹¹ This could be thought of in line with an idea acquiring new justification. For I might have an idea such as the idea of the fourth proportional number whose causal origins are outside of me – perhaps I acquired it from teachers who simply told me the

¹¹ Olli Koistinen (1999) attempts to defend Spinoza against Bennett's criticism in this way in his "Bennett on Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychotherapy," available at <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Mode/ModeKoists.htm>.

rule – and hence inadequate. Later I might derive the rule from axioms and hence acquire new justification. This new justification is the reason that I continue to believe it, so it is the cause of its continued existence although not of its coming into existence. Unfortunately, such an idea is still inadequate, on Spinoza's account of adequacy. Remember, an idea is adequate in the human mind just in case God's possession of the idea is not conditional upon God also possessing an idea not in the human mind (2p11c). But the existence of anything is conditional upon its causal origin and not just on the causes that currently sustain it. So, in this instance, God's possession of the idea of the fourth proportional number would still be conditional upon his having ideas outside of my mind, viz., his idea of my teachers' bodies. So the idea would not be adequate.

Spinoza tries to make the case that it is possible by pointing out that every affection of our bodies has properties in common with every other mode of extension (5p4d). I can only have adequate ideas of common properties. So if I conceive of a passive affect through the common properties of extension, then I will have an adequate idea of it. Yes, but it will be an idea numerically distinct from the passive affect. It must be distinct from it: it has different causes. The causes of the adequate idea of the passion will have causes entirely internal to me, whereas the passion will have some external causes. By Leibniz's law, they must be distinct.

But that there can be a rational idea of any passion does not provide us with any remedy for the passions. At most, it helps specify the parties to the conflict between reason and passion. It does not, however, give us any reason to think that reason enjoys any advantages in this conflict. And it certainly does not entail the kind of psychological alchemy described in 5p3 whereby leaden passion is transformed into golden reason.

You might think that it does indicate an advantage that reason has over the passions in that it guarantees that the mind can form a rational idea for every passion, whereas nothing guarantees that there can be a passion for every rational idea. This ensures that reason need never be outnumbered and holds out the possibility that its representatives will outnumber those of passion.¹² But the struggle between reason and passion is not decided by the relative number of rational ideas and passions. What matters is the aggregate power of the rational ideas compared to the aggregate power of the passions. The raw numbers are meaningless. Of course, if each individual rational idea and each passion had more or less the same amount of power, then whichever side had a numerical

¹² I owe this suggestion to Don Garrett.

advantage would likely have the edge. But there is no reason to assume that such parity obtains.

But what of the tenability of this claim independent of Spinoza's grounds for holding it? Whether or not it is true is surely an empirical matter, but there appears to be a plausible mechanism for it given the assumption that passions have a cognitive dimension, as Spinoza believes. Suppose a passion partially results from a poorly justified belief. For example, it is a tenet of many forms of cognitive therapy that depression is sometimes due to poorly justified negative beliefs. A person, for instance, might believe that no one at work likes her on the grounds that one person at work dislikes her, and this belief might contribute to depression. But the fact that one person doesn't like her is weak evidence for the belief that no one likes her. Reflection on her evidence might lead her to give up the belief that no one likes her and thus help alleviate her depression.

Although this might be effective in special cases, it is implausible to think that it generally is so. Many passions are not due to poorly justified beliefs, for example, love of sensual pleasure. In those cases, it does not appear that acquiring knowledge of them would help control them. For example, if I were to learn exactly how my love of sensual pleasure was a product of evolution by natural selection, I predict that my love of sensual pleasure would be undiminished.

4.2. In the Fact That It Separates the Affects from the Thought of an External Cause, Which We Imagine Confusedly

Love and hate are ideas that register an increase or decrease of power respectively accompanied by an idea of an external cause of this increase or decrease (3p13s). That is, when my power goes up or down and I believe that something external caused this change, then I will love or hate that external cause depending on the character of the change. If I separate my idea of the external cause from the affect, that is, the idea that registers the change in power, then I will no longer hate or love the external cause.

It may seem that this will not bring about any improvement in my condition. If you take the idea of an external cause away from love or hate, then it ceases to be love or hate. But it is joy or sadness. Bennett (1984, 333–5) thinks this is a problem for Spinoza. Isn't sadness just as bad as hate? It hurts just as badly, Spinoza would reply, but it isn't really as bad for you. To see why, let's look at the difference between love and joy. If you love wealth, honor, or sensual pleasure, you will likely make bad decisions. But if you can turn that love into objectless joy, then you

benefit from the upsurge in power without being on the hook to wealth, honor, or pleasure. So you won't run around chasing external things to your own detriment. For similar reasons, sadness is better than hate. If I hate someone, that passion will push me to try to harm her (3p19). This in turn will cause her to hate me and make her try to do me even more harm (4p43). So my hate pushes me to do things that will ultimately result in more harm to me. Sadness has none of these consequences. So although the sadness is in itself just as bad as the hate from which it is derived, the harmful behavioral dispositions associated with the hate are disarmed when it is turned to mere sadness.

How is it possible to separate love or hate from the idea of an external cause? All of your passive affects really do have external causes. According to 1a4 and 2p16, you can't be in a state with an external cause without having an idea of that cause. So being affected by a passive affect entails having an idea of its external cause. How then can Spinoza recommend separating love and hate from the idea of its external cause? Spinoza says that once you have the idea of some external thing, you will continue to believe that the thing exists until you get ideas that are incompatible with the existence of that thing. One way of separating your hate from the idea of its external cause would be to have ideas that entail the nonexistence of the external cause – for example, if you form the belief that the external cause has been destroyed or that it has stopped hurting you. You can't just decide to have such beliefs, but you can increase the likelihood that you will have them if you can bring it about that they are true. That is, you increase the likelihood that you will believe that the external cause of your hate doesn't exist if you destroy it and you increase the likelihood that you will believe that the external cause of your hate no longer hurts you if you mollify it (for example, by repaying its hate with love). This of course, is not any kind of therapy, that is, changing one's emotional life through thought and talk. Rather, this is a matter of changing your emotional life by changing the world.

4.3. In the Time by Which the Affections Related to Things We Understand Surpass Those Related to Things We Conceive Confusedly, or in a Mutilated Way

Affects arising from reason are more powerful in the long run than passions for an object that the mind regards as absent. Every idea, in itself, represents its objects as present. The mind only regards an object *o* as absent if it has ideas whose objects are incompatible with the presence of *o* and these ideas are more powerful than any idea that represents *o* (2p19). Thus we know that any passion for an object regarded as absent

coexists with other more powerful ideas that restrain it. Whatever power of action a passion for an object regarded as absent may possess is reoriented and partially consumed by these other more powerful ideas. Rational ideas, on the contrary, represent the permanent and pervasive features of the world – the common properties of things, God's essence, and the essences of singular things. Nothing can be incompatible with the permanent and pervasive features of the world. So the mind never possesses ideas whose objects are incompatible with the present existence of the object of any rational idea. Thus, whereas passions directed toward objects regarded as absent must contend with rival ideas in virtue of which its object is considered absent, rational ideas never face similar competition.

Moreover, because rational ideas represent permanent and pervasive features, their objects are not subject to change. But, according to 5A1, when two contrary affects are present in the same subject, one or both of them must change until eventually they are no longer opposed. Because rational ideas represent unchanging things, any passion that is not reinvigorated by external causes must change in such a way as to eventually accommodate the rational idea.

We must be careful not to overstate the advantage that would accrue to reason in virtue of these factors. Ideas can oppose each other in ways that do not involve representing incompatible objects. So there may be ideas that are opposed to reason even if no idea can represent an object incompatible with the existence of the objects represented by rational ideas. For example, my passion for wealth is opposed to my rational ideas insofar as it motivates me to perform actions that lead me away from activities that would result in greater knowledge of God, whereas my rational ideas motivate me to perform those actions that would increase that knowledge. My passion for wealth does not represent an object incompatible with the permanent and pervasive features of the world. Rather, it motivates actions incompatible with the actions motivated by ideas that represent those features.

The advantage that reason enjoys is thus freedom from *a certain kind of opposition*, or opposition stemming from a particular source. But it is no more conceivable that reason should rule a finite mind unopposed than that a person should be so fortunate that the order of nature never brought her into contact with an external cause whose nature disagreed with her own (4p4). Thus there could very well be circumstances in which a rational idea faces more overall opposition than a passion for an object regarded as absent even though, unlike the passion, it faces no opposition from this particular source.

The upshot of this remedy is that every mind possesses an internal tendency toward rationality. The external environment intrudes upon

my mind, with the result that I suffer passions that push me from the path recommended by reason. If, at that moment, the external world were to withdraw its interference, my mind would evolve in such a way that those passions would be eventually brought under the sway of reason. It is only on account of the continual renewal of the passions by external causes that this internal tendency toward rationality never comes to a permanent conclusion.

A number of features of Spinoza's account of reason's long-run advantage over passion are problematic. First, it appears that Spinoza here assumes that the only way that ideas can change is by alteration of their contents. That Spinoza believes this is clear from the fact that he explains why rational ideas cannot change by citing the fact that their objects are permanent and pervasive. But it would be much more natural to think that ideas adapt to each other, not only by alteration of their contents, but also by expressing their power of acting differently. Indeed, on other occasions, Spinoza seems to say just that. In particular, that ideas are capable of changing in this way is part of his account of *akrasia*. As noted earlier, according to Spinoza, each idea, in itself, represents its object as present. The mind only regards an object *o* as absent if it possesses ideas the objects of which are incompatible with the present existence of *o* and these ideas are collectively more powerful than the idea of *o*. The power of acting of the idea of *o* is partially consumed by the conflict with its rivals and partially modified by their superior strength. That its power is partially consumed by this conflict explains why, *ceteris paribus*, passions for objects regarded as present are more powerful than passions for objects regarded as absent. That its power is modified explains why a desire for an object *o* regarded as present motivates different actions than a desire for *o* when it is regarded as absent. For example, my desire for food regarded as present will motivate me to eat, whereas my desire for food regarded as absent might motivate me to cook or head out to the store. The content of the idea is the same, but its power of acting is manifested differently in the different contexts.

But if this is so, then there is no reason to suppose that the conflict between rational ideas and passions toward objects regarded as absent will resolve itself by passions adapting themselves to passion, rather than by a process of mutual adaptation or even reason adapting itself to passion by manifesting its power of action differently. The fact that the passions in question are for objects regarded as absent does little to decide the matter. No doubt such passions waste some of their power contending with ideas whose objects are incompatible with the present existence of their object, regarded as absent. But this only shows that, *ceteris paribus*, they will be weaker than rational ideas. When *ceteris* isn't *paribus*, what determines the outcome of this struggle will be the

relative strengths of the ideas in question. The strength of a rational idea is defined exclusively by the nature of the mind. The strength of a passion is a function of the nature of the mind and the nature of its external cause. If the external cause is powerful enough, the passion that it creates will be more powerful than any rational idea, even discounting for the strength it loses in its conflict with ideas whose objects are incompatible with the present existence of its object.

Moreover, 5a1, which provides a crucial premise of Spinoza's argument, is obscure. What is worse, every way of clarifying it seems to render it implausible. What is it for two ideas to cease to be contrary? Suppose I have two contrary ideas, one that pushes me to pursue wealth and one that pushes me to pursue love of family. Suppose that every action that will lead to greater wealth will prevent me from enjoying my family and suppose that every action that will allow me to enjoy my family will prevent me from simultaneously pursuing wealth. Under what conditions do these two passions cease to be contrary? When one of them ceases to determine my actions? When one of them ceases to exert any pull upon me, even pulls that fail to express themselves in action? When one of them is extinguished altogether? It is implausible that all mental conflict of this sort necessarily tends toward any of these. All of them are, of course, possible outcomes, but there are others as well. For example, I could devote myself to the pursuit of wealth while continuing to feel the pull of family, or even alternate between the two pursuits over the long run. Spinoza seems to want to believe that the intellectual love of God, once experienced, will grow and grow so that the only thing that prevents it from entirely consuming the mind is the fresh influx of external stimulation that produces and reinvigorates the passions. But if reason could gain control by this mechanism, then, by the same token, a mind innocent of intellectual love of God but driven by conflicting passions would, if unmolested by external causes, eventually resolve its internal differences and just one passion would hold sway. This assumes that conflict cannot be stable and must always move toward resolution. Why must this be so? Why cannot opposed forces achieve an equilibrium that does not afford any one of them a decisive victory?

4.4. In the Multiplicity of Causes by Which Affections Related to Common Properties or to God Are Encouraged

This remedy relates to how experience and association shape the train of thought. Spinoza believes that the world is such that we will more often have experiences that will call to mind rational ideas than experiences that encourage irrational ones. His account of this begins with

the observation that experience can trigger further thoughts. For example, suppose I am out for a walk and I run into a lion. This experience will likely make me think about lions. It will “arouse and encourage” lion-thoughts. These might well include questions, such as “How could a lion wind up on Jersey Avenue?” or “I wonder what lions like to eat?” but they might also include thoughts not directly related to my experience. For example, I might dream about lions that night or I might remember half-forgotten facts about lions. In any event, my mind is likely to buzz with thoughts of lions.

Spinoza thinks that just as an encounter with a lion makes a person think about lions, so too does an encounter with anything whatsoever turn the mind to thoughts about those things that resemble it and the general qualities that account for that resemblance (2p18). In this putative fact about associational psychology, Spinoza sees an advantage for reason over passion. Everything exemplifies the common properties, so every encounter “arouses and invigorates” the common notions. Common notions are adequate ideas. Insofar as we possess adequate ideas and these ideas play an active role in our thinking, we are rational. So every encounter invigorates ideas that make us rational. Passions are for more specific kinds of objects, so only encounters with things that resemble those particular kinds of objects will arouse and invigorate the passions.

There is a serious problem with Spinoza’s thinking here. Take the lion example again. When I encountered the lion, my thoughts about lions or the property of being a lion were invigorated. My thoughts about mammals or animals or living organisms or physical objects did not receive any such boost from my encounter. Any object exemplifies countless properties. Which ones will grip the mind? The salient ones. The ones that, for whatever reason, stand out and strike the mind as important or interesting or surprising. There are probably no true strict generalizations about what makes a feature stand out, but I would think that the opposite of 5p11, which Spinoza cites as the foundation of this remedy, tends to be true. *Ethics* 5p11 says that “As an image is related to more things, the more frequent it is, or the more often it flourishes, and the more often it engages the mind.” On the contrary, what is typical, common, or normal is often overlooked. Although bodies are extended, encounters with bodies rarely make me think of the common properties of extended things. On the contrary, they usually make me think of the qualities that distinguish them from other bodies.

It might be objected that properties such as mass, charge, and position are possessed by all physical objects and are of considerable interest. Such properties are the modern scientific analogies of Spinoza’s common properties. Doesn’t the salience of these properties vindicate Spinoza’s

view?¹³ No. These properties are of interest due to the fact that they are fundamental, not due to their ubiquity. Countless properties are ubiquitous. Only an elite few are fundamental. Spinoza's account does nothing to explain our interest in the fundamental, because if his account were correct we would be as interested in nonfundamental but ubiquitous properties as we are in fundamental properties.

4.5. In the Order by Which the Mind Can Order Its Affects and Connect Them to One Another

Here Spinoza expounds an advantage that reason enjoys over the passions that also depends upon the association of ideas. Ironically, this remedy highlights the way in which the association of ideas is an irrational mechanism. In 2p18, Spinoza tells us that if we have in the past experienced two things together, then if we subsequently perceive one of them we will automatically think of the other. For example, if in the past I experienced eaten a certain dish at my grandmother's house, then on a future occasion when I taste that dish again I will automatically think of my grandmother's house. In the unqualified way that Spinoza states this principle, 2p18 is implausible. Associations are not that easy to form. Such an association might be formed if the pairing made a suitably large impression on the subject for some reason or if the subject were exposed to the pairing many times. But it is certainly not the case that experience of two things together always forges an associative link. Nevertheless, we need not dwell on such worries because, as we shall see, the use to which Spinoza puts the principle could equally well rely upon a more qualified and plausible version of the principle.

Reason, if ever it does succeed in wresting control of the mind from the passions, knows that its rule is precarious. Powerful external forces that could reinvigorate the passions are never far away. But if reason's rule is long enough, a bulwark against these external forces can be established in the form of a set of associations that will resist the passions and even act as reason's surrogate in the event that the passions overwhelm it. Spinoza believes that reason can discover generalizations about what reason will guide us to do under specific circumstances, which he calls maxims of life. For example, Spinoza thinks that he has demonstrated that rational people respond to hate with love and do not repay it with hate (4p46s). Spinoza offers similar generalizations throughout Part 4 of the *Ethics*. If, in our dispassionate rational moments, we reflect frequently on these maxims of life and imagine scenarios in which passions

¹³ This objection was urged on me by Don Garrett and Alison Laywine.

would drive us to violate them, then we can create an association between the maxim and the scenario. If we subsequently find ourselves in such a scenario, we need not count on the native power of our rational ideas to motivate us to conform to the maxims of life. The nonrational associative links may be powerful enough to enforce such conformity. For example, if a colleague has insulted me in a faculty meeting, I might respond irrationally by making an insulting remark in return. Later, when my anger has cooled and reason again prevails, I might undertake to reflect on the maxim of life that says that rational people repay hate with love and how my behavior violated that maxim. Reflecting long and hard in this way may form an associative link between scenarios in which I am insulted and the maxim. If I am successful, in the future, when I am insulted, I will immediately think of the maxim. Thinking about the maxim may well motivate me to act in conformity to it.

Of course, irrational people can also form associations. For example, if, in the above scenario, instead of retaliating with an insult of my own, I might have been bullied into backing down. Afterwards, still stinging from my humiliation, I might obsessively think about how bad it felt to be bullied and how I should have repaid my colleague with an insult. This could form an association between scenarios in which I am insulted and the irrational maxim, "Always insult those who insult you." Indeed there is no contradiction in supposing that I manage to forge both associations and so when I am insulted I simultaneously think of the rational and the irrational maxim.

Spinoza does not deny this. How then is the possibility of forming associative links a source of the power of reason over the passions? Because there is an asymmetry that favors reason over the passions. Association is an irrational mechanism that can be co-opted by reason. Associations forged by reason are like a fifth column among the irrational forces of the mind. By contrast, there are no rational mechanisms that can be co-opted by the passions.

4.6. *Understanding Things as Necessary*

Curiously omitted from Spinoza's list of techniques for moderating the passions in 5p20s is the technique that many readers of Spinoza associate most with his program for controlling the passions through reason: understanding things as necessary.

Spinoza believes that all truths are necessary (2p44). He believes that knowledge of this helps us free ourselves from bondage to the passions. He writes in 5p6,

Insofar as the mind understands all things as necessary, it has a great power over the affects, or is less acted on by them.

Why should this be so? One plausible line of reasoning begins with the observation that many of our passions are what Strawson (1962) would call reactive attitudes. Reactive attitudes are attitudes that presuppose participation in interpersonal relationships. Our reactive attitudes reflect the concern we have for the good, ill, or indifferent will that other people bear toward us. Many of the most pernicious of the passions that plague us are plausibly counted among the reactive attitudes. For example, envy, resentment, hatred, and anger are all reactive attitudes. Having reactive attitudes depends upon taking a certain stance toward the object of the attitudes or being in a certain frame of mind. Reactive attitudes are contrasted with objective attitudes. Objective attitudes are ones that derive from an effort to objectively understand the causes of the action. So, for example, blaming or resenting a thief involves reactive attitudes, whereas explaining the thief's larceny by reference to the poverty in which he or she grew up or his or her genetic makeup involves objective attitudes. If you understand things as necessary, then you realize that they are parts of causal chains that are themselves necessary. This is to take an objective stance toward things, and it is impossible to form reactive attitudes from within this standpoint.

This Strawsonian interpretation of 5p6 is bolstered by the fact that Spinoza contrasts understanding things as necessary with imagining something as free (5p5d). Whereas we have a greater power over the affects directed toward things that we understand to be necessary, affects toward things that we imagine to be free are the most powerful. Imagining something as free might be seen as a way of conceiving it as a personal and free agent, which is arguably a condition of adopting a reactive standpoint.

Nevertheless, the total evidence points decisively against the Strawsonian interpretation of 5p6. First, Spinoza does not treat this technique as having the limited scope that it would have on the Strawsonian interpretation. Reactive attitudes are a subset of the passions. So if understanding things as necessary gives us power over passions by forcing us to adopt an objective standpoint, it will not help moderate nonreactive passions. Many passions that play a large role in human life are not reactive. Fear, for example, is a significant passion, but it is not a reactive attitude. Fearing some danger does not presuppose that we are engaged in interpersonal relations with the object of our fear. I can fear an earthquake or a forest fire without anthropomorphizing it. Moreover, fear is compatible with thinking about what we fear objectively. I can, for example, study the causes of the fire objectively and still maintain my fear of it. If understanding things as necessary gives us power over the affects by requiring that we adopt the objective standpoint, then it

will not help to mitigate fear. But Spinoza does not think that the power over the affects conferred by understanding things as necessary has such a limited scope. This is attested to by the statement of 5p6, which does not contain any qualifications on the affects over which understanding things as necessary gives us power. Moreover, the two affects that Spinoza cites in the scholium to 5p6 to illustrate this power over the passions, sadness over a lost good and pity, are not reactive attitudes. If I love wealth and I lose a portion of mine, then I will be sad. My sadness does not presuppose that I enter into interpersonal relations with the object of my sadness or have concern for the good, ill, or indifferent will that it bears me. In the case of wealth, such things are impossible. And as Bennett (1984, 341) points out, neither is pity a reactive attitude. Pity, for example, is a natural response to a sparrow with a broken wing. I need not anthropomorphize the sparrow in order to pity it. I need not imagine that the sparrow bears me any good or ill will. I need only note its suffering, which is perfectly compatible with thinking about it objectively.

What is more, the actual justification that Spinoza offers for 5p6 ultimately rests on an entirely different basis from the Strawsonian line discussed above. Spinoza claims that the reason that an affect is more powerful if we imagine the object toward which it is directed as free rather than understanding it to be necessary is that when we imagine it to be free, we imagine it to be unconditioned by external causes (5p5 and 3p49). By contrast, when we understand it to be necessary (assume that the object is finite), we understand that it is conditioned by an infinite chain of finite causes (5p6 and 1p28). Spinoza thinks that love or hate is diminished to the extent that we imagine that the joy that love involves or the sadness that hate involves has more than one cause. He appears to think that our love or hate is a fixed quantity that we distribute among the causes of our joy or sadness. If we understand a finite thing to be necessary, then we will understand that it has infinitely many causes. Our love or sadness will thus be divided among infinitely many objects. Assuming that our love or hate is finite, the amount of love or hate directed toward each cause will approach zero.

Unfortunately, it is implausible to think that love and hatred is a fixed quantity to be distributed among its causes.¹⁴ For example, suppose that I hate Jones because I believe that he poisoned my dog. Now suppose that I learn that Jones did not act alone but had Smith as an accomplice. I will not hate Jones less upon learning this. I will likely now hate both Jones and Smith, each with the same intensity with which I once hated

¹⁴ Here I am following Bennett 1984, 318.

Jones alone. For the same reasons, it does not follow that if I come to understand that the object of my hate was conditioned by an infinite chain of causes that I will hate each link of the chain with a portion of the quantity of hate that I initially had for the object. I could very well equally hate all of them with as much passion as I had for the original object of my hate alone.

5. CONCLUSION

In the end, the techniques for moderating the passions offered by Spinoza in Part 5 of the *Ethics* are not impressive. The only technique that appears workable is the one that involves habituating oneself to associate the true maxims of life with the circumstances in which they would be relevant. All of the others rest on dubious assumptions.

I do not think that Spinoza's failure here stems from any lack of argumentative skill. He is, rather, doomed to failure because the basic claim that he seeks to justify is false. Spinoza believes that acquiring knowledge will reorder our desires. Once we have tasted rational inquiry we will, little by little, lose our appetite for external goods such as wealth, honor, and pleasure. He does not claim that this is an inexorable progression, but he does think that there is a powerful natural tendency in this direction. The techniques discussed in Part 5 of the *Ethics* are meant to be the mechanisms by which this transformation occurs. But experience teaches that there is no such universal tendency. Many people who have attained a high degree of intellectual perfection and a large amount of knowledge of nature and our place in it still covet wealth, honor, and pleasure and experience no diminution in their love of these things as a result of their increased intellectual perfection. Naturally, scientists and philosophers tend to love wealth less than, for example, bankers. But this is likely less an effect of their erudition than a partial cause for their chosen vocation: it would be imprudent indeed to go into science or philosophy if what you really wanted out of life was lots and lots of money. But it does not appear that the learned love honor less than other people. And I would conjecture that they love pleasure no less than the average person. There is evidence that Spinoza himself placed little value on wealth, honor, and pleasure. Perhaps he mistakenly assumed that it was his intellectual perfection that made him so.

But let me be clear: in no way do I wish to deny the appeal of the kind of spirituality championed by Spinoza. Clearly, the study of nature can invoke awe and delight. And doubtless, in some fortunate individuals, this awe and delight can lead to the kind of satisfaction that makes less noble goods appear less attractive. But Spinoza's claims are far more

sweeping. He believes that all knowledge has this effect on everyone. Because his account is meant to support this more universal claim, it sheds no light on the explanation of the more restricted, but much more plausible, claim that some kinds of knowledge has this effect on some people.