Gersonides and Spinoza on God’s Knowledge of Universals and Particulars (11.14.14)

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(Forthcoming in Ofer Elior, Gad Freudenthal, and David Wirmer (eds.), *Gersonides Through the Ages*)

“For as the heavens are higher than earth so are my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9)

Introduction

“*Virum eruditissimum* [a most learned man]” is what Spinoza called Gersonides.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is quite a compliment for Spinoza, an author who rarely speaks about other writers in a non-critical manner.[[2]](#footnote-2) Zeev Harvey has convincingly shown that Spinoza’s notion of “*amor Dei intellectualis*” is strongly indebted to Gersonides’ discussion of divine joy and love (*hesheq*),[[3]](#footnote-3) and that some aspects of Spinoza’s *conatus* doctrine can be traced to Gersonides’ discussion of the way the form strives to preserve existence.[[4]](#footnote-4) There are quite a few other issues on which the two philosophers seem to have significant affinities,[[5]](#footnote-5) and overall it would seem fair to say that the study of the philosophical dialogue between them is still in its early stages. It is also worth noting that Spinoza’s reception of and sympathy toward Gersonides are somewhat surprising, since his stated attitude toward Aristotle and the Aristotelians is quite hostile.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the current paper I will concentrate on a topic concerning which the two philosophers seem to have diametrically opposed views: the question of God’s knowledge of universals and particulars. In order to unfold the development of this issue, I will adopt a diachronic approach. I will begin with the relevant views of Aristotle and Avicenna, and then turn to an exposition of the positions of Gersonides and Spinoza. I will conclude with some insightful reflections by a latter-day South American scholastic , Jorge Luis Borges.

Part I: Aristotle’s *Epistêmê*

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle repeatedly states that knowledge [*epistêmê*] pertains only to universals. Thus, in the course of his investigation concerning whether the first principles [*archai*] are universal or individual, he writes:

If they are not universals but of the nature of individuals, they will not be knowable; for the knowledge [*epistêmê*] of anything is universal. (*Met* III.6| 1002b30).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Why does Aristotle think that *epistêmê* pertains only to universals? At least part of his motivation is expressed in the following three passages from the *Posterior Analytics*. In the first of these, he states that in order for a belief to count as knowledge it must be demonstrable. In the second, he states that demonstration pertains only to propositions that are *necessary*. In the third, he argues that that there are no demonstrations that concern particulars, since propositions about particulars are not necessary (i.e., particular can change or “perish”).[[8]](#footnote-8)

[…W]e say now that we do know through demonstration. By demonstration I mean a scientific deduction, and by scientific I mean one in virtue of which, by having it, we understand something (*Post Anal* I.2| 71b17-19).

Since it is impossible for that of which there is understanding *simpliciter* to be otherwise, what is understandable in virtue of demonstrative understanding will be necessary (*Post Anal* I.4| 73a22-24).

It is evident too that, if the propositions on which the deduction depends are universal, it is necessary for the conclusion of such a demonstration and of a demonstration *simpliciter* to be eternal too. *There is therefore no demonstration of perishable things*, nor understanding of them *simpliciter*, but only accidentally, because it does not hold of it universally, but at some time and in some way (*Post Anal* I.8; italics added).

From the three passages above we can trace Aristotle’s reason for holding that *epistêmê* pertains only to universals. Yet, we should keep in mind that Aristotelian universals are not entities existing separately in a Platonic realm, independent of the particulars that instantiate them. Since Aristotelian universals are immanent in the particulars that instantiate them, our knowledge of any universal is *eo ipso* knowledge of the particulars which instantiate it. Thus, Aristotle’s claim that there is no *epistêmê* of particulars seems to amount to view that there is no knowledge that pertains only to a specific particular.[[9]](#footnote-9) Let me also note that Aristotle does not hold that we have no cognitive access to particulars *as such*, but rather that such access as we might have does not meet the rather high criteria for being *epistêmê*. For this reason, Myles Burneyat has suggested that it would perhaps be better to translate ‘*epistêmê’* as ‘understanding,’ in order to distinguish this kind of perfect knowledge, while still allowing for inferior manners of knowledge that could apply to particulars.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Let us turn now to Avicenna. In a recent article, Peter Adamson has argued that Avicenna’s position on the question of divine knowledge of particulars is often misunderstood. Adamson points out: because Avicenna’s discussion of God’s knowledge appears in the middle of the theological section of the *Metaphysics* of the *Healing*, it has been interpreted in strictly theological terms. That is, Avicenna has been taken as asserting that God, whose knowledge is one and immutable, cannot know particulars on account of their plurality and mutability.[[11]](#footnote-11) Against this common interpretation, Adamson argues that Avicenna’s views on divine knowledge should be understood in the context of his general epistemology:

If we take account of this context, we will realize that the reason God does not ‘know particulars’ is very simple: *there is no such thing as knowledge of particulars*. This holds true for humans no less than for God. Humans may be *aware* of particulars […] but it is, strictly speaking, impossible for us to have *knowledge* of a particular object as such.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Adamson argues – quite convincingly as far as I can see – that Avicenna follows Aristotle’s claim in the *Posterior Analytics* (that is: the claim that there is no *epistêmê* of particulars), and thus restricts knowledge [*ilm*] to universals only. Human beings have cognitive access to particulars through sensation and imagination. Yet God, being a pure intellect, does not sense or imagine things, and thus can know only the essential features of particulars, through his grasp of intelligible universals.[[13]](#footnote-13) With this crucial background in mind, we can now turn to Gersonides.

Part II: Gersonides on God’s Adequate Cognition of Contingencies

Gersonides dedicates the third book of *Milhamot ha-Shem* [*Wars of the Lord*] to the question of the divine knowledge of particulars. Following an initial presentation of the problem and the opposed views on it, he turns, in the second chapter, to discuss the arguments of both camps. He first presents eight arguments by those, like Aristotle, who deny that God knows particulars. Next, he offers two arguments advanced by Maimonides, who followed “our sages of the Torah” in affirming the divine knowledge of particulars, and discusses Maimonides’ responses to the opposed arguments. In the third chapter, he critically examines these responses, presenting an important critique of Maimonidean negative theology along the way. Summarizing the state of the debate at the beginning of the fourth chapter, Gersonides writes:

Now, when we consider those arguments that have been brought forth in favor of divine knowledge of particular things and the arguments adduced by the philosophers against this thesis, there is no alternative but to say that God knows them in one respect but does not know them in another respect [*she-yedaam be-tsad, ve-lo yedaam be-tsad*]. But what these respects are, would that I know![[14]](#footnote-14)

Despite the almost desperate tone of the last sentence (“would that I know!”), Gersonides immediately begins to present his own solution to the problem:

It has been previously shown that these particulars are ordered and determined [*mugbalim u-mesudarim*][[15]](#footnote-15) in one sense, yet contingent [*efshariyim*] in another sense. Accordingly, it is evident that *the sense in which God knows these particulars is the sense in which they are ordered and determined*[…] For from this aspect it is possible to have knowledge of them. On the other hand, *the sense in which God does not know particulars is the sense in which they are not ordered, i.e., the sense in which they are contingent*. For in the latter sense knowledge of them is not possible. However, God does know from this aspect that these events may not occur because of the choice which He has given man[…] But [God] does not know which of the contradictory outcomes will be realized insofar far as they are contingent affairs.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The claim that God does not know the future choices of human beings is likely to be criticized for significantly compromising divine omniscience. To counter such criticism, Gersonides adduces:

The fact that God does not have the knowledge of which possible outcome will be realized does not imply any defect in God. For perfect knowledge of something is the knowledge of what that thing is in reality [*lefi ma shehu alaiv*]; when the thing is not apprehended as it is, this is error, not knowledge. Hence, God knows all these things in the best manner possible, for He knows them insofar as they are ordered in a determinate and certain way, and He knows in addition that they[[17]](#footnote-17) are contingent insofar as they fall within the domain of human choice [and as such knows them] truly as contingent.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In the rest of chapter four Gersonides revisits each of the arguments of the two camps in the debate and shows that his delicate solution is immune to the attacks of both sides. He concludes the third book of the *Wars* with a chapter attempting to show that his nuanced position is supported by various Biblical passages, that it was held also by Ibn Ezra, and that it was considered a legitimate religious position by Maimonides.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The restrictions Gersonides imposed on the divine knowledge of particulars has traditionally been deemed rather bold.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the following section, we will encounter another bold, Jewish philosopher – though, remarkably, in an almost complete inversion of the view of Gersonides (and other medieval Aristotelians), Spinoza would argue that God knows *only* particulars.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Part III: Spinoza Turns the Table

The *Cogitata Metaphysica* is a two-part appendix to the only work Spinoza published in his own name, his 1663 geometrical presentation of Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*. The seventh chapter of the second part of the *Cogitata Metaphysica* is dedicated to the issue of God’s intellect. One of sections of the chapter is titled “How God knows [*noscat*] singular things and universals.” The section, which follows a brief discussion of God’s knowledge of sins and *entia rationis*, reads thus:

But in the meantime, we must not pass over the error of those writers who say that God knows [*cognoscere*] only eternal things, such as the angels, the heavens, etc., which they have feigned [*finxerunt*] to be, by their nature, unsusceptible either to generation or to corruption, but that he knows nothing of this world, except species, inasmuch as they also are not subject to generation or corruption. These writers seem determined to go astray and to contrive the most absurd fantasies. For what is more absurd than to deprive God of the knowledge of singular things, which cannot exist [*ne… esse possunt*] even for a moment without God’s concurrence? Then they maintain that God is ignorant of the things that really exist [*res realiter existentes*], but fictitiously ascribe to him a knowledge of universals, which neither exist nor have any essence beyond that of singular things. *We, on the contrary, attribute a knowledge of singular things to God, and deny him a knowledge of universals, except insofar as he understands human minds*.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Why does Spinoza’s God know universals only insofar as he “understands human minds”? For Spinoza, universals are aids that we use in order to compensate for the limitations of our cognitive system. We cannot perceive and retain particulars in the compete fullness of their myriad characteristics, and to counteract this weakness and allow ourselves to function in the world, we compress the data we perceive by using universals. Thus, instead of retaining all the minute details of certain particulars, we employ universals such as ‘hippos,’ ‘zebras,’ ‘chairs,’ or even ‘things.’ It is far easier to retain ‘two hippos’ than the infinite complexity of the characteristics of the entities designated by this expression. [[23]](#footnote-23) Universals are of no use to God, since he has no cognitive limitations of this kind.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, he knows universals since he knows the human mind, including its limitations and its compensation mechanisms.

Let me note that the early Spinoza construes his nominalism as a rejection not only of Platonism but also of the Aristotelian position, which he considers to be a poorly motivated compromise with Platonic realism. The following passage from Spinoza’s *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well Being* appears in the context of his discussion of the so-called “problem of evil” and of the apparent imperfections in nature.[[25]](#footnote-25) The ascription of evil or imperfection to things, claims Spinoza, relies on a comparison we draw between a particular thing and the universal under which it falls. If the particular at stake does not meet the standard of the universal, we deem the particular imperfect or evil. Thus, claims Spinoza, the problem of evil is grounded in a fictitious ontology of universals. Responding to the question how can God allow for imperfections in nature, Spinoza writes:

But this objection arises from ignorance, from the fact that men have formed universal Ideas, with which they think the particulars must agree in order to be perfect. They maintain, then, that these Ideas are in God’s intellect, as many of Plato’s followers have said, viz. *that these universal ideas* (*such as rational animal*, etc.) *have been created by God.*

And though Aristotle’s followers say, of course, that these things are not actual [*dadelyke*], but only beings of reason, nevertheless they very often regard them as things [*zaaken*]. For they have said clearly that [God’s] providence does not extend to particulars, but only to kinds.E.g., God has never exercised his providence over Bucephalus, but only over the whole genus Horse. They say also that God has no knowledge [*wetenschap*] of particular and corruptible things, but only of universals, which in their opinion are incorruptible.

But we have rightly regarded this as indicating their ignorance; *for all and only the particulars have a cause, not the universals, because they are nothing* [*niets*]*.[[26]](#footnote-26)*

Recall now our brief discussion of Aristotle at the beginning of the paper. Spinoza’s presentation of the Aristotelians’ position in the passage above fits well with Aristotle’s justification, in the *Posterior Analytics*, of the claim that *epistêmê* pertains only to universals. Notice that the Dutch ‘*wetenschap*’ is the equivalent of the Latin, ‘*scientia*,’ and the Greek, ‘*epistêmê*.’ Just like Avicenna, the Aristotelians, which are Spinoza’s target in the passage above, seem to hold that God knows things through the highest kind of cognition only; but since this kind of cognition cannot pertain to particulars, God cannot know particulars.

Spinoza does not seem to be impressed by this argument of the Aristotelians against (divine) *epistêmê* of particulars. Instead of engaging the Aristotelians’ argument, Spinoza dismisses their position as relying on the fiction of universals, which he considers to be just “nothing [*niets*].”[[27]](#footnote-27) At this point we may well ask: who precisely were the Aristotelians that Spinoza had in mind here, and was Gersonides one of them? In spite of the similarity between the position of Spinoza’s “Aristotelians” and that of Gersonides, there is a unique element in Gersonides’ view about God’s knowledge of particulars that seems to be absent in the Aristotelians’ view, i.e., the concern for preserving free human choice through future contingency. Interestingly, Spinoza addresses precisely this position in another passage from the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, in the chapter on God’s intellect. Following an unreserved affirmation of God’s omniscience, Spinoza turns to examine views which undermine it. After asserting that the objects of God’s intellect are determined by God’s intellect, and not the other way around, Spinoza notes:

Because some people have not taken sufficient note of this, they have fallen into very great errors, and have maintained that there is matter outside God, coeternal with him, existing of itself. According to some, God, in understanding, only reduces this matter to order; according to others, he impresses forms on it*. And then some have maintained that things are, of their own nature, either necessary, or impossible, or contingent, and that God, therefore, also knows them as contingent and is completely ignorant of whether they exist or not*[…] In addition to these, I could mention here still other errors of this kind, if I did not judge it superfluous. From what has been said, their falsity should be evident without further discussion (CM II 7|I/261/29-262/6; italics added).

It is quite likely that in the first two sentences of the passage Spinoza has Gersonides’ views on creation as a target,[[28]](#footnote-28) but for our purpose the crucial sentence is the third. Here, Spinoza addresses Gersonides’ claim that insofar as future events are contingent, God knows them *as such*. As we can see, for Spinoza, unlike Gersonides, such a view ascribes to God ignorance and thus deeply undermines divine omniscience.

Conclusions

In this paper we have studied the views of Gersonides and Spinoza on the question of divine knowledge of particulars and universals. Both philosophers have been harshly criticized for their philosophical boldness on issues of religion. It seems that is precisely this uncompromising boldness and commitment to unbiased philosophical inquiry that led the two to radically opposed positions on the issue of divine knowledge. We have seen that Gersonides’ claims that God knows future contingencies *as such* has been sharply criticized in Spinoza’s early work, the *Cogitata Metaphysica*. We have also encountered Spinoza’s claim that God knows universals only insofar as he knows the limitations of the human mind and its compensation mechanisms. God’s infinite intellect has no cognitive limitations, and thus God’s thought does not employ universals. It seems, I would suggest, that Spinoza and the medieval Aristotelians had different understandings of what constitutes a thought.

For a helpful illustration of the philosophical intuition of the medieval Aristotelians who consider the use of universal concepts as essential to thinking, let me turn to a short story by the twentieth century South-American writer Jorge Louis Borges. Borges describes the eccentric case of a certain Ireneo Funes who had an extraordinary memory and had been able to retain with minute precision almost any of his past experiences.[[29]](#footnote-29) As a result of this flawless memory, Funes, claims Borges,

was almost incapable of general, Platonic, ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic *dog* embraces so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front).[[30]](#footnote-30)

Funes’ mental world was of one of infinitely many well-ordered and inter-connected details. In such a mental world, the use of abstracted universals was not only redundant, but in fact distorting (i.e., turning precise cognitions of particulars into confused universal notions, or images). In spite of his extraordinary cognitive capacities, Funes, claims Borges, was hardly capable of thinking.

Without effort, he had learned, English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Borges’ Funes was not omniscient, but were we to contemplate an omniscient mind, knowing all particulars in their minute details and inter-connectivity, it would seem that for such a mind there would be no place for genuine reasoning or the acquisition of new knowledge. In his *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza reaches this very conclusion, claiming: “From this follows that God never had a potential intellect, *nor does he conclude anything by reasoning* [*neque per ratiocinium aliquid concludere*].”[[32]](#footnote-32) Spinoza’s God, it would seem, thinks but does not reason.[[33]](#footnote-33)

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Additions:

- Why does Spinoza reject universals? – 1. Perceiving non-beings as beings. 2. They differ from one person to another? [So what. We also have different ideas of particulars]. 3. They do not reflect they cause? [But they do. See 1.].[See Adamson, Baghadad, 149: Farabi: when we use universals, we do not need to understand how and whence they arise]. – Read Newlands, Spinoza’s Early Anti-Abstractionism.

1. Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise*, Ch. 9, Annotation 16| III/257. Unless otherwise marked, all references to the *Ethics*, the early works of Spinoza, and Letters 1-29 are to Curley's translation: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. In references to the other letters of Spinoza I have used Shirley's translation: Spinoza, *Complete Works*. For the Latin and Dutch original I have relied on Gebhardt’s critical edition. I cite the original texts according to the volume and page number of this edition (for example, III/17). I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza’s works: TdIE – Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*], TTP – Theological-Political Treatise [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*], TP – Political Treatise [*Tractatus Politicus*], CM – Metaphysical Thoughts [*Cogitata Metaphysica*], KV – Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being [*Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*], Ep. – Letters. Passages in the Ethics will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); ‘d’ stands for either ‘definition’ (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or ‘demonstration’ (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1. For the Hebrew text of Gersonides’ *Milhamot ha-Shem*, I relied on the 1560 Riva di Trento edition. I used Seymour Feldman’s English translation of this work. I am indebted to Nick Kaufmann and JasonYonover for comments on an earlier version of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In fact, this compliment is imbedded in a critique of Gersonides’ commentary on Judges 3:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, 103-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Harvey, “Gersonides and Spinoza on *Conatus.*” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Most intriguing is Gersonides’ claim that only God should be called ‘substance’ in the full-sense of the term, while all other things subsist through him [*hu asher hiqnam atzmutam*]. See Gersonides, *Milhamot ha-Shem* III, 3| *Wars of the Lord*, vol. II, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, TTP Ch. 1 (III/10), Ch. 13 (III/168), and Ep. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Met. XIII.10| 1086b31 and De An. II.5| 417b22. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Adamson, “Knowledge of Particulars,” 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Adamson, “Knowledge of Particulars,” 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Understanding.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Adamson, “Knowledge of Particulars,” 257. For an illuminating discussion of the reception of the epistemology of the *Posterior Analytics* by the 10th century Baghdad philosopher, Yahya b. Adi, see Adamson, “Knowledge of Universals and Particulars in the Baghdad School,” 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Adamson, “Knowledge of Particulars,” 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Adamson, ‘Knowledge of Particulars,” 268-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gersonides, *Milhamot ha-Shem* III, 4 (p. 23 in the Riva di Trento edition)| *Wars of the Lord*, vol. II, 117. Translation slightly altered. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In his commentary on Genesis 2:2, Gersonides makes the striking claim that “the rational order of nature [*ha-siddur hamuskal asher la-olam*]” is “God, in certain way [*hu ha-shem be-ofen ma*].” Thus, it seems that God’s knowledge of the particulars insofar as they are part of the rational order of nature is, in a sense, self-knowledge. The similarity to Spinoza is intriguing. I am indebted to Zeev Harvey for pointing out this passage to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gersonides, *Milhamot ha-Shem* III, 4 (p. 23 in the Riva di Trento edition)| *Wars of the Lord*, vol. II, 117-118. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I have slightly amended Feldman’s translation here in order to better fit the original Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gersonides, *Milhamot ha-Shem* III, 4 (p. 23 in the Riva di Trento edition)| *Wars of the Lord*, vol. II, 118. Translation slightly altered. For an interesting, alternative, reading of these passages, see Manekin, “Conservative tendencies,” 320-331. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Gersonides, *Milhamot ha-Shem* III, 6 (pp. 25-26 in the Riva di Trento edition)| *Wars of the Lord*, vol. II, 136-137. Here Gersonides cites Maimonides’ claim in *Guide* III 20 that the view according which “knowledge has for its object the species, but, in a certain sense, extends to the individual of the species” is “the opinion of all those who adhere to the Law [*da’at kol ba’al torah*] in view of what is required by the necessities of speculation” (Pines II 481). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “It is easy to point out, as Crescas would, that there is nothing left in common between the God of Gersonides and the biblical God. According to Crescas’ interpretation of Gersonides, Jacob’s descent into Egypt is an act of free will, therefore not known to God. From this act flows the entire history of Israel, which God likewise does not know.” Sirat, *History of Jewish Philosophy*, 296. For Crescas’ attack on Gersonides, see Crescas, *Or ha-Shem* [Light of the Lord], II, 1, iii (pp. 135-140 in Fisher’s edition). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Zeev Harvey pointed out to me an intriguing passage in Maimonides’ *Guide* which can be read as anticipating Spinoza’s stance: “It would not be proper for us to say that providence watches over the species, and not the individuals, as is the well-known opinion of some philosophic schools. For outside the mind nothing exists except the individuals; *it is to these individuals that the divine mind is united*. Consequently providence watches only over these individuals” (*Guide of the Perplexed* III 18| Pines II 476). Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Cogitata Metaphysica*, II, vii| I/262/30-263/9. Italics added [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “Those notions they call *Universal,* like Man, Horse, Dog, etc., have arisen from similar causes, viz. because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human Body that they 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 imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body. For the body has been affected most by [what is common], since each singular has affected it [by this property]. And [NS: the mind] expresses this by the word *man,* and predicates it of infinitely many singulars” (E2p40s1). Cf. my “On the Exact Science of Non-Beings,” 8-12, and “ ‘*Scientia intuitiva*’,” 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In the passage preceding the previous quote, Spinoza notes that God knows *entia rationis* insofar as he knows the human mind and its limitations. He then adduces: “But we do not mean that God has such modes of thinking in himself in order to retain more easily the things he understands” (I/262/26-28). God simply does not need the aid of *entia rationis*. Cf. Ep. 19| IV/91-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For Spinoza’s bold solution of the problem of evil, see Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Short Treatise*, I, vi| I/42/32-43/9. Italics (at the end, but not at the beginning of the quote) added. For a very similar analysis of the connection between universals and the problem of evil, see the following passage from Ep. 19: “It is certain that privation is nothing positive, and that it is said only in relation to our intellect, not in relation to god’s intellect. This arises because we express all the singular things of a kind (e.g., all those which have, externally, the shape of man) by one and the same definition, and therefore we judge them all to be equally capable of the highest perfection which we can deduce from such a definition. When we find one whose acts are contrary to that perfection, we judge him to be deprived of it and to be deviating from his nature. *We would not do this, if we had not brought him under such a definition and fictitiously ascribed such a nature to him. But because god* does not know things abstractly, and does not make such general definitions […] it follows clearly *that that privation can be said only in relation to our intellect, not in relation to god’s.* By this, in my opinion, the problem is completely solved” (IV/91/25-92/22). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See also Spinoza’s description of Beings of Reason (universals included) as “Non Beings [*non entia*]” (CM I 1| I/235/2). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Gersonides, *Milhamot ha-Shem* VI, 1-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Borges, “Funes, the Memorious,” in *Ficciones*, 107-115. <was repeat? [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Borges, *Ficciones*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Borges, *Ficciones*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. CM II 7| I/261/20. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. More specifically, Spinoza’s God *intuits* all things and their causal inter-connections in one glance. See my paper, “ ‘*Scientia intuitiva*’,” 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)