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Knowledge Beyond Reason in Spinoza's Epistemology: *Scientia Intuitiva* and *Amor Dei Intellectualis* in Spinoza's Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

Spinoza's epistemology is complex, with both a rationalist and an intuitionist side. The key to understanding Spinoza's epistemology is to focus on the notion of intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*), which provides an immediate, non-discursive knowledge of its singular object. Intellectual knowledge in Spinoza's philosophy has an affective component: it is a form of love, and ultimately, given Spinoza's monistic metaphysics, it is a form of the intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*). This note will insist with Lloyd's 'Reconsidering Spinoza's Rationalism' that such a doctrine is an integral part of Spinoza's philosophy. However, the approach relies on a somewhat different but complementary route to Lloyd's, with special attention to Spinoza's philosophy of geometry and his immersion in medieval Jewish philosophy.

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1. Spinoza's Epistemology: Rationalist and Intuitionist

Genevieve Lloyd's Spinoza is quite a different thinker from the arch rationalist caricature of some undergraduate philosophy courses devoted to 'The Continental Rationalists'. Lloyd's Spinoza does not see reason as a complete and self-sufficient source of awareness and deductive knowledge (*cognitio* and *scientia*), operating independently of the senses, imagination, and the emotions; nor, for this Spinoza, is rational thought productive of the highest grade of knowledge. Instead, that honour goes to a third kind of knowledge: intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*), a kind of cognition which provides an immediate synoptic knowledge of its singular object. To the embarrassment of some philosophers, intellectual intuition has an affective component: it is a form of love, and ultimately given that human beings are finite modes of God/Nature (*Deus sive Natura*), it is a form of the intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*).

The question of whether Spinoza is a rationalist has the appearances of a terminological debate, but the issue goes much deeper. If Spinoza is a rationalist, then perhaps his doctrine of intuitive knowledge and the intellectual love of God must be jettisoned. But if such doctrines are jettisoned, to what extent does the remaining view count as

Spinoza's philosophy? My position will be that the doctrines of intuitive knowledge and the intellectual love of God are integral to Spinoza's philosophy, but in fact this does not require us to relinquish an appreciation of his rationalism, now construed in part as his deep commitment to the rational and necessary order of nature, and to the mind's capacity to know nature (see Garber [2015]). What is required is to abandon a certain caricature of rationalism, and to see that the real historical Spinoza's rationalism is distinctive, just as Lloyd [2021] asks us to do in her contribution 'Reconsidering Spinoza's Rationalism' and other work [Lloyd 1984, 1996]. Spinoza indeed differs from ideal rationalists who acknowledge no form of knowledge superior to that obtained by pure reason. But such rationalists and their opposite, the empiricists, are stereotypes derived from Kant's history of philosophy and have little value in understanding what Spinoza actually thought.¹

2. Tripartite Epistemology and the Third Kind of Knowledge

As is well known, Spinoza's *Ethics* has a tripartite epistemology on which there are three grades of knowledge: (1) knowledge deriving from the senses, images and imagination, and emotions (*imaginatio*); (2) knowledge deriving from reason (*ratio*); and (3) knowledge deriving from intuition (*scientia intuitiva*). At *Ethics* Part II, proposition 40, scholium 2, Spinoza refers to knowledge based on reason as "the second kind of knowledge" and knowledge from intuition as 'the third kind of knowledge' [Spinoza 1677 (1992): E2P40S2, 90]. Now part of the question that Lloyd poses in her contribution can be seen as asking: what is the relationship between these kinds of knowledge? If the third kind of knowledge supersedes the second kind, then Spinoza rejects a key tenet of rationalism. Rationalists, according to a widespread view of rationalism, believe that:

- (i) Reason is the main way we have of knowing about the world and ourselves;
- (ii) Reason is the supreme way we have of knowing.

Furthermore, we can adapt John Cottingham's useful outline of features of rationalism to include the following:

- (iii) Reason is a better guide to knowledge than the senses or the imagination, which can be deceptive;
- (iv) Our knowledge forms a systemic whole, not a fragmented collection of isolated bodies of distinct bits of unrelated knowledge;
- (v) Mathematics (geometry especially) provides an ideal model of knowledge;
- (vi) Causes necessitate their effects, so that the causal order in nature is one of necessary connections governed by laws [Cottingham 1988: 10–11].

To this we might add something to reflect the traditional optimism of rationalists about the capacity of reason to know the world:

- (vii) The mind, using reason, can have knowledge of the world.

¹ In his overview of rationalism, John Cottingham [1988: 2] suggests the *locus classicus* of this Kantian history of philosophy is Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* [Kant 1781 (1929): A51/B75, B271, B327].

Lloyd rightly points out that Spinoza rejects (i) and (ii) in the *Ethics*. Moreover, I think there is a strong case to be made that Spinoza would reject (vii) if it were taken to mean that the mind using reason *alone* can know the world. However, it does seem that Spinoza accepts claims (iii)–(vi) in the *Ethics*. I shall not belabour the point here, as the support for this view will be obvious to those who know Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Nor would Lloyd herself necessarily disagree; she too is not against classifying Spinoza as a rationalist so much as against a certain impoverished ‘triumphalist’ notion of rationalism in which reason dominates and suppresses other cognitive functions such as the emotions and the imagination.

I think Lloyd prompts us to rethink what being a scientific rationalist requires. A scientific rationalist perhaps accepts (v) and (vi) at a minimum. However, being a scientific rationalist does not require holding to (ii). It is not necessary nor particularly good epistemology to hold that mathematical and scientific knowledge are the fruit of pure dry reason alone. In fact, there is a great need to take a more complex view of what goes on in producing scientific knowledge of the world.² Lloyd alludes to a possible role for the constructive imagination in producing knowledge, suggesting, following a lead from G.E.R. Lloyd, that imagination may supply analogies or models that are needed for scientific thinking. This seems to be a strong point, although I am less convinced so far that this point informs Spinoza’s own philosophy of science. It definitely merits further investigation.

On a standard reading of *Ethics* Part II, proposition 40, scholium, the three kinds of knowledge form a hierarchy of sorts, with each level of knowledge depending on and transcending the prior level of knowledge (see Lloyd [1996: 70]). On Lloyd’s preferred reading, as I understand it, there is not so much a strict hierarchy as a matrix and collaboration between the different kinds of knowledge. While intuitive knowledge is in some sense superior, it is also different in character from reason and imagination, each of which—especially working in concert—make their contributions to knowledge. For Lloyd’s Spinoza, ‘reason guides the vagaries of the imagination; yet it never entirely transcends it’ [Lloyd 2021: XXX]. Reason never entirely transcends the imagination, as we shall see, because of the kind of embodied material creatures that real human beings are (see Gatens and Lloyd [1999]; Lloyd [1996]; Lloyd [1984]). Moreover, Lloyd holds that the imagination is ‘reason’s collaborator, not its enemy’ [Lloyd 2021:XXX]. I take Lloyd here to be reading Spinoza’s epistemology with an emphasis on the imagination and intuition as being disciplined by reason, but also supplying indispensable materials for thinking and thereby making knowledge of the world possible.

For Spinoza, to imagine something is first of all to make an image of something and comes about when an external body affects the human body [Spinoza 1677 [1992]: E2P17S, 78]. The mind may retain an image of a body even when it is no longer actually present, so that the imagination enables the mind to represent bodies no longer present. This important feature of the imagination enables Spinoza to explain the origin of illusions, prejudices, and prophecies across the whole of his major works (both the *Ethics*, and the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*). The imagination is not a source of error in itself, Spinoza tells us, but is a source of inadequacy insofar as the

² For example, Rebecca Goldstein [2006: 186ff] presents a conception of Spinoza as an ‘ecstatic rationalist’, in which intuitive knowledge yields knowledge of the world, and presumably is involved in scientific knowledge as well.

images in the imagination do not specify that the body represented is no longer actually present. The imagination cannot therefore provide adequate knowledge of external bodies [ibid.: E1P26C, demo., 50]. So, the imagination on its own has limitations as a source of knowledge.

140 However, when reason recognizes that the human mind has been in the grip of an inadequate idea of the imagination, then it is really quite liberating, as this inadequate idea may make someone anxious or fearful. In recognizing the inadequacy of such ideas, they lose their power over us. Reason can free us from superstitious beliefs that haunt us or fill us with fear. The fear of damnation must have been a real fear
145 for some of Spinoza's less-free-thinking contemporaries and predecessors. One has only to look at the painting *The Last Judgement* (c.1482) of the Flemish-Dutch painter Hieronymous Bosch to see how such fear of hell fired the imaginations of people. To be liberated from such fear by reason would be no small contribution to well-being, although one wonders if art would suffer.

150 How does reason perform this critical function? How does reason recognize the inadequacy of its ideas based on the emotions, sensation, and the imagination, which Spinoza jointly terms '*imaginatio*' or the first kind of knowledge [ibid.: E2P40S2, 90]. The epistemic key to recognizing the inadequacy of the first kind of knowledge lies in recognizing the *incompleteness* of its ideas: its total lack of specification as to whether its ideas are ideas of actually existing bodies. Errors arise concerning
155 whether or not a body is present to the mind, so the imagination is at best a source of knowledge of contingent, not necessary, truths. Reason, however, seeks to understand things as they are 'in themselves' and seeks necessary truths. So, reason abstracts from particular contexts and does not deal directly with the representation of particular bodies and their duration. Reason views things 'in the light of eternity' (*sub quadam specie aeternitatis*) and in doing so appears to overcome some of the limitations of the perspective of an embodied spatiotemporally situated creature [ibid.: E2P44C2, 93].

165 Now the paradigm of such rational knowledge is the geometer's knowledge of the timeless truths of geometry, and, indeed, Spinoza mentions Euclid's geometry in explaining how one may know a truth according to reason (*ratio*), the second kind of knowledge at Part II, proposition 40, scholium 2. He also gives an extended example focusing on how the mind can complete its knowledge of the ratios between numbers in the sequence 1:2:3:__. He says we can infer in 'one single intuition' that the fourth number must be 6, after we grasp the ratio 1:2 and the way this rule governs the sequence. In this case, we do not need to go through the proof from Euclid's *Elements* [Euclid c.300 BCE (1956): VIIp19, 232]. The 'one single intuition' is an instance of intuitive knowledge, while going through Euclid's proof is an instance of rational knowledge. I think that the geometrical model of knowledge is
175 important to Spinoza, but he is also aware of its limitations. In particular, he is aware that geometrical knowledge *cannot* in principle yield knowledge about unique individual things (*singularia*): finite modes; the bodies that compose the world conceived under the attribute of extension; Nature. Reason can know about the common notions that pertain to all bodies, but not about what makes something *this* particular body [Spinoza 1677 (1992): E2P37, 87]. To know that about a body only by the means of pure reason and general laws, would require comprehending casual-explanatory proofs that proceed *ad infinitum* [ibid.: E1P28, 50], an impossibility for a limited finite human mind.
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Reason as a process of thought (reasoning) is deductive and inferential, and not the right sort of faculty to represent and deliver immediate, non-inferential knowledge of individuals. The paradigm of rational knowledge is geometry and geometers *never* reason about particular individuals, but only representatives, in order to draw general conclusions. Euclid's theorems are not about some particular triangle, but *all* triangles given the assumption of his axioms.³ For this reason, the faculty of intuition is necessary to represent particulars. Intuition is the faculty of representing individuals in an immediate, non-inferential fashion, but it is not a matter of perception: intuitive knowledge 'sees' straightaway how things are by viewing each thing as following inexorably from the divine essence. Intuitive knowledge is 'knowledge which proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things' [Spinoza 1677 (1992): E2P40S2, 90]. Unlike reason, intuition provides us with knowledge of individuals rather than dealing merely in common notions, and it proceeds downwards from *knowledge of formal essences* to knowledge of the *essences of particular things*.

It has to be said that interpreters have had a hard time making sense of this passage. The key contrast is between formal essences and the actual essences of particular things. I think we can see the formal essences of things as comprised by their formal definition. At Part II, proposition 8, Spinoza speaks of 'the ideas of non-existing individual things or modes' being 'comprehended in the infinite idea of God in the same way as *the formal essences of individual things or modes are contained in the attributes of God*' [ibid.: E2P8, 67]. As an illustration, he considers the equal rectangles that can be formed from the segments of two intersecting chords in a circle, and suggests that these possible rectangles, even when not drawn, are present in the circle drawn in the same way that in the same way that logically possible non-existing things already exist in the essence of God [ibid.: E2P8S, 68; Euclid 300 BC (1956): IIIp35, 71].

So, if one has an adequate idea of the formal essence of God's attribute of extension, then perhaps one will know the main definitions, formulas, and theorems of geometry. But to see how this formal structure informs a particular individual, a body, one has to grasp its actual essence, what really makes it what it is and without which it could not be. How might this be? Spinoza holds that the actual essence of a thing is 'the *conatus* with which each thing endeavours to persist' [Spinoza 1677 (1992): E3P7, 108]. However, he also holds that each complex body has at any time a certain proportion (*ratio*) of motion and rest between its component bodies [ibid.: E2P13 lemmas, 71]. The *conatus* of a thing then may be its tendency to preserve its proportion of motion and rest amongst its component bodies, a kind of homeostasis. As Lloyd writes, 'Indeed, for Spinoza the individuality of a body resides in its preservation, amidst change, of a distinctive proportion of motion and rest.' [Lloyd 2021: XXX]. So in knowing the essence of a particular thing, the mind knows about the *conatus* of a particular thing, and its tendency to preserve the order amongst its component parts. Putting it all together, in intuitive knowledge, one sees how the *conatus* of a particular thing follows from and is conditioned by the formal structure of a divine attribute.

What kind of knowledge is this? It appears to involve in part *a priori* knowledge of formal structure combined with an intellectual intuition of particulars. What kind of

³ The *locus classicus* for this discussion is Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'The Discipline of Pure Reason in its Dogmatic Use' [Kant 1781 (1929): A713/B741–A738/B766, 574–593].

knowledge is intellectual intuition? It is not perception or sensation, but it appears to involve particularity.⁴ It is tempting to say that it is not purely *a priori*, though I think Spinoza may well have held that *a priori* (divine) knowledge of particulars was possible. This is an interesting medieval view found in thinkers like Gersonides, who probably influenced Spinoza, but is wholly alien to modern science.⁵ Modern scientists have abandoned the view that *a priori* knowledge is sufficient to produce scientific knowledge. Spinoza is indeed optimistic that such knowledge is possible. For Spinoza, in representing any individual mode, one is thinking of that mode under one of the attributes of substance, any one of which is adequate to express the divine essence. In Spinoza's ontology, the idea of any mode necessarily involves the essence of the one substance, that is, God: 'Every idea of a body existing in actuality necessarily involves the eternal and infinite essence of God' [Spinoza 1677 (1992): E2P45, 93–94]. As the human mind does have ideas of things actually existing ('in actuality'), these ideas will necessarily involve the eternal and infinite essence of God. Moreover, these ideas, being of the divine essence reflected in many different bodies, will be of things that are 'common to all things' and 'equally in the part as in the whole', and such ideas are always adequate [*ibid.*: E2P38, 87].⁶ In any case, the human mind's knowledge of the divine essence will be adequate, that is, sufficient to perceive its truth [*ibid.*: E2P47, 94].

Summing up, Spinoza argues that knowledge of individual things cannot be left wholly to the imagination, but neither can it be left to reason alone. Instead, some third way of knowing—intellectual intuition—provides adequate knowledge of individuals. This knowledge involves knowledge of God, but fortunately, 'God's infinite essence and eternity are known to all' [*ibid.*: E2P47S, 94], a startling claim until one realizes that it is a direct logical consequence of Spinoza's metaphysics (see especially Spinoza [*ibid.*: E2P11S, 71]). For to know a mode is to know its dependence on divine essence for its existence and essence. Knowledge of God then permeates and suffuses Spinoza's epistemology.

3. *Amor Dei Intellectualis*, The Intellectual Love of God

Lloyd's reading of the *Ethics* gives due emphasis to Part V, in which Spinoza explains how knowledge of God leads to blessedness and true contentment. In Part V, the third kind of knowledge—intuitive knowledge—introduced in Part II, is identified with the intellectual love of God. The notion that the highest form of knowledge is also a form of love is a startling thesis from the perspective of contemporary epistemology. However, as Spinoza's notion of knowledge is a non-sceptical one that gives pride of place to *understanding*, *epistēmē*, as well as to intellectual intuition, *noesis*, it is not such an odd claim.⁷ For it is not so far-fetched to think that in some special cases, to know and understand an object is to love it. For Spinoza, God/Nature is

⁴ For some nineteenth-century interpretations of intellectual intuition and brief insight into the reception of Spinoza's philosophy by mathematicians and theologians, see Newstead [2009]. For comment on Hegel's readings of Spinoza, see Lloyd [1984: 141–7].

⁵ As Stephen Nadler [2001: 123] writes, 'Spinoza's third kind of knowledge . . . is, for all intents and purposes, the acquired [active] intellect of Gersonides'. In a parallel with Spinoza, Gersonides [1329 (1973): 425–40] holds that God has knowledge of particulars and one can love God.

⁶ Wolfson [1934] suggests that these ideas are none other than Euclidean geometry axioms and definitions.

⁷ I follow Wolfson [1934: 146] in holding that Spinoza's epistemology maps tolerably well onto some of Aristotle's psychology.

just such a perfect object for which perfect knowledge would give rise to love: that is, pleasure along with the thought of God/Nature as the cause of this pleasure [Spinoza 1677 (1992): E5P32C, 217].

Nor can the doctrine of intellectual love be dismissed as ancillary to Spinoza's system, as it figures in most of his works. In his *Short Treatise*, the 'intellectual love of God' appears fully for the first time, where it is described as the highest good and end for human beings [Spinoza c.1662 (1985), 104–7]. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Chapter 4, the intellectual love of God is again upheld as the supreme good for human beings, although by now it is quite clear that the God in question is the God of philosophers, not the God of scripture [Spinoza c.1670 (1951): 59–60]. In *Ethics* V, Spinoza returns to the theme of the intellectual love of God, and details how adequate self-knowledge leads to the intellectual love of God [Spinoza 1677 (1992): E5, 201–23].⁸

It is worth noting, as Lloyd herself is doubtless aware, that the intellectual love of God was a doctrine percolating in Jewish medieval philosophy, being present in Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, where he advises that one should strive to focus one's attention on obtaining knowledge of God (in his view, through the study of Torah) and try not to be distracted by worldly affairs [Maimonides c.1190 (1956): III, ch.51, 386]. In so doing, one will not weaken one's 'bond' with God. In Spinoza's philosophy, the nature of God has radically changed, since God may be adequately conceived under the attribute of extension as the whole of Nature. The method of obtaining knowledge of God has also absolutely changed, since it is necessary to use reason and intuition, and not to rely on readings of scripture. Indeed, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza suggests that the imaginative ideas in scripture produced by prophets are inadequate for the purpose of obtaining knowledge [Spinoza c.1670 (1951): ch.II, 27ff]. However, the ethical command to obtain knowledge of God remains the same. Moreover, something of the awe reserved for the knowledge of God in more orthodox religious views remains in Spinoza's view. At *Ethics* Part V, proposition 36, scholium, we learn that our salvation and blessedness (*beatitudo*) consist in the intellectual love of God, which is associated with glory (*gloria, kavod*) in the Hebrew scriptures and involves a certain 'spiritual contentment' (*animi acquiescentia*) [Spinoza 1677 (1992): E5P36S, 219]. This in turn is supposed to explain the affective power of intuitive knowledge, insofar as it involves an appreciation of divine glory and a certain peace of mind. The affective power of intuition outshines the affective power of rational knowledge for ordinary human beings, conditioned as they are to find it easiest to deal with particulars. These sorts of claims by Spinoza appear to allow that emotions (from the first kind of knowledge, *imaginatio*) impinge on the highest kind of knowledge. If this is not a mistake on Spinoza's part, then it supports Lloyd's collaborative, non-hierarchical reading of the three kinds of knowledge.

4. Conclusion

In 'Reconsidering Spinoza's Rationalism', Genevieve Lloyd provides a rich array of resources for approaching Spinoza's philosophy. I have necessarily focused in this

⁸ For a thorough charting of the appearances of the intellectual love of God in Spinoza's system as well as in the works of Maimonides, Crescas, Arbabanel, see Erik Dreff's [2017] PhD manuscript. For an illuminating comparison of Spinoza, Gersonides, and Maimonides on this theme, see Harvey [2014].

short note on a few of her remarks and suggestions. We have seen that the concepts of intellectual intuition and the intellectual love of God, with intricate philosophical pedigree going back to at least medieval Aristotelian philosophy, are reflected in Spinoza's philosophy. Moreover, they are certainly relevant in illuminating Spinoza's metaphysics and epistemology, particularly his mysterious third kind of knowledge, intuitive knowledge. So, is Spinoza a rationalist or an intuitionist? The answer seems to be 'both'. For neither rational nor intuitive knowledge suffices for knowledge of God/Nature on its own. Without rational knowledge, the common notions pertaining to bodies are not known. But without intuitive knowledge the mind cannot know about the actual existence and essence of the particular individual things that compose the world. Complete perfect knowledge such as that enjoyed by the divine intellect requires both an intuition of particulars—an acquaintance with the essences of things—and an understanding of the laws that govern the world.

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