**Footnote Fixation**

**Collegiality in Academic Spinoza Studies**

**A Methodology and a Mindset**

**That Misleads the Unwary**

Footnote Fixation- indicates the prevailing practice in academic philosophy of an overreliance on referencing and footnoting in an attempt to substantiate and corroborate an author’s ‘reading’ of a text. The purported purpose is to ‘illuminate’ the work under consideration. Whereas the contention here, certainly as will be demonstrated in Spinozistic commentary, is that this methodology only serves to ‘cloud’ the original authors intended meaning.

Although this is clearly not an intentional misrepresentation, it nevertheless, because of its predominance throughout Spinoza commentary tends to mislead the unwary reader. Another overarching indicator which serves to illuminate the totality in effect of this widespread problem in interpretation of Spinoza’s writings, are the variety of clusters of similarly pre-prejudicial ‘readings’ which taken together compromise the potential for any reader to come away with an accurate depiction of Baruch’s system.

If this fixation and attendant mis-reads could be amended, divergent ‘readings’ would be replaced with clear understanding of the author’s intended meaning. Yes, there would still remain somewhat different interpretations, not every mind is pre-disposed to draw the exact same conclusions, but these differences would be aired in a common court of dialogue to be compared and amended into one line of consistency. That is what this essay will attempt to establish as a corrective to this unfortunate development, not only in Spinozistic work, but across the board in other philosophical extant literature as well.

There are roughly two basic approaches which can be employed when attempting to bring to light the thinking and the intended meaning within the writings of a given philosopher.

One approach is a development or offshoot of the standardized research method. It involves performing a literature review and of gathering reams of information concerning the historical precedents, linguistic origins and comparative merits of the authors work. Broadly speaking this will be referred to as ‘comparative analysis’.

When it is performed with deep insight, careful documentation and by observing with a certain distinctive clarity, the times, the issues, and the people of that epoch, the results can be quite edifying and more importantly useful for obtaining clarity on the measure and relative import of a particular thinker on the history of Philosophy.

The inherent difficulties built-in, as it were, into this method arise when, due to a set of shortcomings that have crept in over time, and which often occur during this research and analysis, and in less capable hands, results come about which comprise a series of missteps which end up becoming a part of the published extant material. Worse than that, these missteps take on the airs of proven and established scholarship, which becomes the accepted factual representation of a philosopher’s message and value.

So-called ‘schools of thought’ spring up out of these fallacies, institutional confusion ensues and permeates the academic landscape.

It must be noted that this ‘comparative analysis’ methodology is the preferred and prevalent one employed in academic circles today.

In the case of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, it can be stated without much fear of contradiction that much, if not most of the recent and contemporary commentary falls into this category. It is the shortcomings which accrue from the misapplication of this analytical style and which have become ‘hidden from view’, which will make up the subject matter of this essay.

At this point in time it is not clear that this approach has as yet been called into question. Its application is so widely distributed and its results so patently accepted as verified and accurate, that this document may mark one of the first to call into question the usefulness of this academic stalwart.

And this oversight is what has made necessary this document which will depict in detail the process and erroneous assumptions which result in this questionable work being passed off, typically unintentionally, as bonified scholarship.

The other approach which can be employed in attempting to bring to light the thinking and intended meaning of, in this case, Baruch Spinoza, is what can be termed in the vernacular, simply ‘doing philosophy’. The methodology used to perform this type of explication involves solely and only focusing exclusively on the writer’s words, and attempting to coax out the thread of argument and exposition which will be most effective in making clear, a coherent and rhetorically compelling explication of the author’s intent. It stands in stark contrast to the comparative analysis rubric. But because of the universally held belief that a single human being’s perceptive skillsets, knowledge base and analysis capacity are limited to what is termed ‘subjective opinion’, this clustering of likeminded misperception rules the pages of peer-reviewed periodicals and edited collections of essays on Spinoza.

This ‘doing philosophy’ approach, does not rely on any footnoting, or historical comparisons with other thinkers, or tracing of any linguistic lineage or conceptual similarities with contemporary schools of thought. The driving force behind this approach is to let stand the author’s words on their own strength and validity. It will be contended furthermore, that this method of extracting meaning from careful reading, thoughtful reflection and faithful recapitulation of the author’s thoughts is the preferable one. It is not that analysis has no place, but rather that it should be applied cautiously and with a keen eye on its inherent demerits. This means it should be applied strictly to the study of the history of Philosophy.

And so, let us then begin. Our focus will be on the aforementioned approach above, which for this paper will be collectively monikered, ‘Collegiality’. A few words on why this form of ‘comparative analysis’ with the additive of mutual admiration and reciprocal respect afforded to colleagues often shields from view a built-in bias and disregard for authentically verifiable transliteration, within the academic philosophical community, will serve to set the pace for this polemic corrective.

The relevance of the comparative analysis process for rendering an accurate portrayal of the intended meaning of any given philosopher hinges on a series of assumptions which purportedly interrelate and stand in support of one another.

To reiterate; this process involves performing a literature review and of gathering reams of information concerning the related historical precedents to the piece under consideration, of identifying contemporaries whose work either reflects the author under consideration or whose work was tangentially assumed to be an influence on said author. The final aspects in this method comprise identifying similar linguistic usages, identifying semantic and etymological precedents, and of estimating the comparative merits and demerits of the authors work.

*-Literature review*- By combing the contemporary scene and identifying similarities within the contexts of subject matter, adherence to philosophical themes and major systemic overlaps between the author’s work under review and the apparently associated thinkers of the same era or ‘school’ of thought, a ‘comparative ‘baseline’ of similarities is developed.

*-Historical precedents*- By reaching back, typically to the original ‘golden age’ of Greek philosophy and tracing forward from the originators of ‘schools’, precedents are identified which appear to bear a resemblance and to mark a continuity in thought among the ancients and the current thinker.

*-Linguistic usages*- By gleaning the author’s body of work and selecting out terminology which either proves a direct match for, or demonstrates some type of etymological connection to, usages from the past, analysts attempt to make linkages which demonstrate linguistic univocality.

Now all of this sounds quite appropriate and appears to reflect a sound and thorough methodology. And yet built-in and often underlying this approach and its assumptions, what reveals itself is a pattern of preformed and often prejudicial, superimposed beliefs, about the nature of contiguous ideation from the past, which purportedly automatically and systematically and directly, applies to and is contiguous in thought, with contemporary thinkers and their work.

This conceptual frame views the History of philosophy as one long unbreakable and interlocking chain from essentially the Pre-Socratics up to the present day.

Thus, whatever emerges from the literature review, historical precedents and linguistic usages search, overlays a uniformity of pre-suppositions which tend toward disguising the contribution of emerging thought and virtually makes undetectable any new, emerging or perhaps even revolutionary work.

One more comment about this Comparative analysis/ collegiality axis. This process takes preference over the ‘doing philosophy’ or any other potential method of philosophical investigation because of its one overriding principle. And that is the ingrained conviction that this methodology, with its heavy reliance on investigative historical search for linguistic linkages and preformed determination of conceptual uniformity with the past, is the one and only way to obtain to certainty. That is, that by building a never-ending chain of interpretive data amassed and peer reviewed over an extended period the most accurate ‘picture’ of the relevance and significance of any philosopher’s work is guaranteed to emerge.

The contention here will be that just the opposite is what more often than not occurs. Witness all of the uncountable ‘readings’ which are on offer and the varying ‘schools’ of thought which have and continue to proliferate in academic philosophy. It is time that this method is placed under scrutiny and exposed for what it has become; one long never-ending disagreement which only serves to befuddle any hope of deriving the full benefit from the acknowledged ‘Wisdom of the Ages’.

Because this may be the first time that this topic has been broached, a few examples are required to illustrate the predicament.

One of the underlying assumptions made previous to any survey of the extant and a comparison among lexical similarities among authors is a subtle but pervasively negative assessment of the History of Philosophy. This mentality ‘assumes’ that contemporary thinking and methodologies have undeniably supplanted and indeed surpass the work from days gone by.

The past is viewed simply as a type of platform or baseline and an archaic one at that. As time has gone on, so this thinking assumes, philosophy and philosophers have grown more sophisticated and refined.

This permits a wholesale dismissal of any notion that thinkers from previous epochs and their works might hold something of relevance to contemporary issues. And meanwhile completely glosses over any possibility that previous thinkers may have on offer, new and as yet unrecognized contributions to be discovered. It further, and quite conveniently assumes, that the current commentator holds a superior position and is therefore positioned, nay entitled, to make broad generalizations which effectively diminish the contributions from past thinkers.

The evidence for this appears in a dismissive attitude displayed as preamble to the much of the Spinoza commentary on offer in the secondary.

This is detailed below in the sectioned titled; ‘When you hear…’

The linguistic usage assessment evinces a host of misapprehensions and results, and reveals itself in two primary manifestations.

One- As mentioned previously the contemporary commentator typically demands from past authors a conformity to lexical standards which have no place in and did not even exist at the time of these writings. Univocal definition serves as a prime example.

For example- In the Note 1 to Proposition XXXIII in “Ethics” Part 1 we find two distinct usages for the term ‘necessary’;

*“A thing is called necessary either in respect to its essence or in respect to its cause; for the existence of a thing necessarily follows, either from its essence and definition, or from a given efficient cause.”*

Things which are ‘necessary’ in respect of their ‘essence and definition’, include; Substance, Attribute and the Infinite Modes. Meanwhile things which are ‘necessary’ in respect of their efficient cause are the finite modalities. The difference in definition and usage renders these two ‘terms’ poles apart. The first one, we’ll call ‘Necessary’ and it refers to ‘things’ which involve substance, that is, are in a direct line of causation from god.

[Note- To understand why Baruch joins the terms ‘*essence and definition’* see TIE 95-97- on Definition]

To continue;

The other usage of ‘necessary’ evokes a part of those things whose involve *‘existence does not essence’*, which includes contingent beings, that is, people. These two usages could not be at a further remove. What is much more damning for these commentators, this example is only one out of dozens more, like;

“Substance’, which serves as another prime example of this ‘jumping to conclusions’ in the quest for simplicity and univocality in Spinoza’s system. This form of misreading takes on a slightly differently skewed aspect. Assuming and meanwhile insisting that Baruch’s employment of the term ‘substance’ must bear some etymological and semantic relationship with the use of the same word in the scholastic or ancient traditions, thereby attributing the self-same linguistic relationship for Spinoza’s substance, and Aristotle’s primary ‘ousia’, completely suppresses the fact that Baruch’s substance connotes an entirely new and revolutionary understanding of the self-caused immanence, power, infinity and intelligibility within his completely ‘new’ usage of ‘substance’. This is no trite little error. It is egregious and has, even up until today, kept from coming to light the legitimate, organic and innate interconnection between Substance/god/nature and the whole of humanity; effectively disguising from us our birthright! This is nothing short of appalling.

Yes, this is highly technical material, quietly stated and it could be overlooked; but not by supposed Spinoza Scholars. The only way to confuse these distinctions is to actively dismiss Spinoza’s intended meaning and to supplant it with one manufactured by the commenter. So, this means that any commentator who faults Baruch on the grounds of any missing ‘univocality’ in language, entirely misses the point.

An unintended consequence of this contemporary stipulation and demand for univocal interpretations in Spinoza’s lexicon is completely dismissed as unique, long before even considering the possibility, that Baruch’s usage of this familiar language comes packaged with an entirely new and uniquely derived set of definitions for these terms which bear no resemblance to anything which had come before.

What happens next is fairly predictable and equally as unfortunate. By misconstruing the definitions and therefore the meanings of Baruch’s entire lexicon, all manner of contradictions and misunderstandings become attributable to his system.

Added to this comes the adherence to this same absurd rejection of Spinoza’s ingeniously crafted linguistic creativity by each and every of the followers of the original reductionist schema.

And so, what results is a string of commentators, across literal decades of time, who all cling stubbornly to the self-same misapprehension of Baruch’s language and who draw the same erroneous conclusions again and again. The paradoxes, logical errors and contradictions which are mistakenly attributed to Spinoza’s writings become ‘institutionalized’ and passed off as authentic Spinoza ‘Scholarship’. (An amusing turn of phrase, since most of these ‘scholars’ barely disguise their joy in finding Spinoza’s system wanting.)

The question at this point might become, why would someone who disdains Baruch’s work identify themselves as a Spinoza ‘Scholar’? Baffling!

Soon we will launch into a detailed and specific enumeration of the major critical fallacies which have historically and even up to today continue to misrepresent Spinoza’s system. This enumeration will serve as an attempt to demonstrate the built-in flaws in the comparative analysis method.

But for the moment, below is a ‘sketch’ of the typical lead-in comments which should serve as a warning to the reader of the negative characterization which will follow.

**Sidebar**

**When you hear…**

In the midst of your research and study in the Spinoza extant commentary, when you read anything that resembles:

“Spinoza was no logician; his modal thinking seems to have been neither skillful or knowledgeable.”

“To attempt to ‘deduce the finite from the infinite’ -if Spinoza had really attempted anything of the kind- would have betrayed a serious mis-understanding of the powers of human thought.”

These two direct quotes, from not to be singled out and named, ‘Scholars’, serve as prime examples of what becomes possible when at any point in a reading of Baruch’s system someone who lacks the creative imagination or native intelligence to attempt to, at the very least , apply the principle of charitable interpretation, and instead just plunges right in and declares Spinoza to be wrong; the default position for all of this tomfoolery. Especially when you can identify another “Scholar” such as yourself to corroborate your highly esteemed interpretation of one of the plethora of Spinoza’s weaknesses. And in this exercise, nothing too demeaning is considered out of bounds. The following are a selection from other accusations against Baruch’s capability as a thinker and master of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, psychology and ethics and human nature.

Spinoza’s system falls short and disappoints on so many levels…

It is clear that Spinoza did not think carefully concerning…

What Spinoza could not have anticipated is…

Spinoza’s dogmatic insistence and simplistic depiction of truth ignores…

The unintended consequences of Spinoza’s geometric framework…

The elements of modern science which Spinoza would be obviously unaware of…

The contradictions built into Spinoza’s assumptions about necessity and possibility…

The failure of Spinoza’s ontology lies in…

We could never be Spinozists with what we now realize…

Why Spinoza’s concept of infinite attributes is untenable…

The problem of evil irresolvable in Spinoza’s monism…

Spinoza’s causal determinism compromises his notion of supposed human freedom…

The scholastic trap which doomed Spinoza’s project…

When, in the course of your studies of commentary on Spinoza, and please remember that you must engage in continuous review and study of all the extant available to you; when you come across statements like those above take two courses of action. One, be alerted to the possibility that the author, no matter how well respected or renowned, is not exposing anything whatsoever in Spinoza’s system but rather displaying their lack of comprehension of the ‘clear labyrinth’, a quite forgivable shortcoming. And,

Two, continue reading said commentary while bearing in mind this friendly advice: there are no shortcomings in Baruch’s philosophy; there is nothing he did not, or could not know about us and all of nature. And if this does not appear to you as self-evidently the case, then go back and begin your studies anew.

Professor Harold Foster Hallett employed the expression of a lack of *‘intellectual detachment’* to describe the case wherein the ‘philosophe’ commentator ‘jumps’ to conclusions about Spinoza’s intended meaning before even taking the time to carefully appraise and to reflect carefully, analyze thoroughly and only then making summary judgments.

Observing these caveats, given the required time and study, a very positive attitude and indefatigable constancy, coupled with a fair amount of good fortune; you will one day experience the totality of the unsurpassed beauty and magnificence that was the mind of Baruch Spinoza!

**To the Heart of the Matter**

**The Fallacies and How to Avoid Them**

As stated previously, there are numerous mistaken assumptions with which many commentators have approached Spinoza’s system. These have taken shape within the bulk of the ‘extant’ and serve as formidable barriers to entry into the actual intended meaning within Baruch’s thought. They do so because they have received a ‘stamp’ of authority in light of being both published in official academic books and journals, of serving as the subject matter in official symposia and conferences on aspects and themes in Spinoza’s system, and of being included in authorized editions of essays and articles published by acknowledged Spinoza ‘experts’.

The most effective way to avoid these ‘fallacies’ is for them to be enumerated and displayed, one-by-one with the corrective which can and will serve to ‘set the record straight’.

Here then is that list, each of which will serve as a heading, followed by an **Explanation**, detailing the problem and the suggested corrective, followed by what will be termed, the **‘upshot’** or summation. The last segment under each of the ‘fallacies’ will be; **‘for the student’**. Some advice on how to avoid the results of ‘footnote fixation’ and comparative analysis.

**Topic**- Misrepresentation/Mistake

**Geometry-** Misapprehending Baruch’s usage of geometry; confusing what they interpret to be his usage of mathematics as a ‘search’ for apodictic certainty.

**Reason-**-Mistaking ‘reason’ for a concept rather than Spinoza’s reason as a function of the mind, and an unerring one at that.

**Twin Attributes—**Patent misunderstanding of Spinoza’s twin attributes of ‘Thought and ‘Extension’; considering them as ‘parallel predications’ of substance, or as ‘accidents’ adjectivally attached to god, somehow.

**Lexicon-** Germaine to our discussion and specific to the point is the fact that Spinoza employs terminology to suit specific needs for explication within his system and that it cannot be constrained by an artificial demand for univocality.

**Determination-** Blurring the distinction between ‘determination’ and Baruch’s ‘necessity/conditioned/determinate’ existence.

**Logic-** Demanding that Spinoza’s system respond to the dictates of contemporary ‘formal logical necessity’, while along side this treating his propositions as ‘assertions’.

**God-** Confusion relating to Spinoza’s employment of the word God brought on through the unconscious remnants in the mind of the writer’s which results in incomprehensible assertions.

**Freedom/Necessity-** Absolute befuddlement over Baruch’s pairing of Freedom with Necessity

**Morals-** Commentators across the board have decried the lack of any abstractable, prescriptive moral code in Spinoza’s ethics

**Evil/Power/Conatus-** The ascription of evil on earth as possible only through God’s willing it to be so. Missing entirely the primal role in Baruch’s system of unrelenting, infinite and eternal power.

**Substance-** Consigning as incomprehensible, Baruch’s unique ‘self-caused’ universal immanence

Let us now examine in detail each of these ubiquitous and egregious misrepresentations of Spinoza’s system in order to set things aright.

**Geometry**

-Misapprehending Baruch’s usage of geometry; confusing what they interpret from his usage of mathematics as a ‘search’ for apodictic certainty. Whereas Baruch never sought mathematical certainty for his demonstrations, but rather logical and deductive coherence.

Thinking that Spinoza’s geometrically based ‘demonstrations’ are equivalent and interchangeable with necessary formal logical assertions, based on this mistaken mathematical attribution, marks another instance of attempting to apply twenty-first century standards in a completely inappropriate context.

**Explanation**- Before attempting to emend the misapprehension, by commentators, of Baruch’s use of the ‘more geometrica’ or geometric method/manner, it will be vital to pinpoint what is meant when anyone speaks of ‘mathematical certainty’. This two-word phrase serves as the basis for most commentators’ insistence that, in using a geometric presentation for his “Ethics”, Spinoza somehow was postulating that the entire text should be taken to involve apodictic certainty from start to finish. This is equivalent to making the claim that Spinoza believed that his text comprised a formulaic mathematical and logical necessity which is irrefutably certain.

This conclusion completely misconstrues not only Spinoza’s choice but also completely misapprehends the nature and process involved with plane geometry. This is the point where the distortion of Baruch’s intended meaning begins. Virtually every commentator in the Spinoza literature holds some variation on this belief. This invalidates their exposition from the outset and it only gets worse from here.

Geometry is the study of the relations between objects or figures in a defined and hypothetical space. Spinoza’s philosophy involves the interrelations between people and objects in real-time space, as they live every day; as essentially ‘human’ geometers.

In Euclidean or Plane geometry there are two components; the ‘postulate’, with its attendant hypotheses, axioms, proofs, corollaries, etc. and the ‘demonstration’ (not ‘proof’), which contains the figure or pictorial representation which provides a graphic or visual for what is described in the postulate. The figure does not, is not, and never has been intended to serve as any type of ‘proof’.

And, so it is with Spinoza’s use of the geometric method. He lays out his proposition, which stands for the postulate in plain geometry and his ‘proof’/ demonstration in the form of notes, corollaries, scholia and lemmas, stand in place of the figure in plane geometry. It is at this point that Baruch adds an additional geometrically based entity, the individual reader’s mind; as an object in space. This has been referred to in other places in this series as ‘human geometry’.

The sum total of this ‘image’ is comprised of the ‘words’ on the page in the “Ethics” which are inert and lifeless until brought alive by the power within the intelligence of a human mind. The words are virtually transferred through the spatial entity to the mind; ‘human geometry’. That is why Baruch selected the geometric method!

Neither the geometric figure nor the hypothesis and its supporting elements can stand alone. It is only when both pieces are considered together that a complete geometrical demonstration is displayed. The figure considered on its own shows nothing more than lines, connected at the junction of a number of angles, nothing more. It is the pictorial representation of the demonstration.

So it is with the proposition. Without the support and reciprocity of the figure the story laid out in the mathematical theorem remains essentially just words on a page. It stands as the verbal representation of the demonstration. One does not ‘prove’ the other, it merely illuminates the demonstration.

This is precisely the same reason why the reader is being exhorted to ‘bring to life’ Baruch’s words.

The exact same relationship which holds for the geometrical demonstration; the partnership, so to speak, between the pictorial and verbal representations is brought to bear between Spinoza’s propositions and the individual human mind that reads and absorbs them.

Without the reciprocity and engagement of the reader’s mind, Baruch’s geometrical formulations remain only words on a page, devoid of life or meaning.

Only an active agent in the person of each reader will bring Spinoza’s meaning to light. This is exactly how he understood and intended his philosophy to be comprehended, as he said it, ‘*one mind at a time*.’

This also conveys clearly what Baruch meant by the self-evident nature of the truth. That self-evidence emerges and takes shape only when the thinker inside each of us ponders what Spinoza proposes to us through the shaping of his language in the ‘Ethics Demonstrated in the Geometrical Method’.

A side by side comparison of any one geometric theorem and any one of Baruch’s propositional theorems will demonstrate their similarity. Simply replace for the geometric figure in the theorem an individual human mind and for the postulate and the remaining supporting statements in the same theorem, replace those with Spinoza’s propositions and supporting statements.

The figure and the one human mind both serve the exact same purpose; they complete the demonstration.

With some introspection and serious consideration on the part of the reader it will become clear that this explanation clears up any mystery surrounding the ’Geometric Method’.

It is not magic or mystery, it is a plain and straightforward deductive demonstration. Human geometry consists in a natural and innate function connecting the mind and the objects in the natural world. Further, human geometry serves as a function within the framework of the human body. Kant referred to it as the ‘subjective essential’. In common parlance that renders as the natural ‘gyroscope’ which permits us to perambulate through space without falling down.

This reality is what makes Baruch’s choice of the geometric method in the “Ethics” a natural match for conveying his message about ‘*god, people and things’*.

Plane geometry is a reproduction in a mathematical depiction of one of the primary, analyzing and measuring functions of the brain.

**The upshot**- The majority of commentators on Baruch’s system have consistently mistaken his use of geometry for a desire to lend ‘mathematical’ certainty to his philosophy. For him that would be an absurdity; that is, to confuse mathematical certainty, with systematic logical consistency, within a propositional demonstration.

The out growth from this misplaced demand in the commentary, leads to a distortion of the spatial dimension within the form of the Ethics and its purposive spatial correlation between the propositions in the text and the human experience of living within the spatial dimensions which configure our world.

**For the Spinoza student**- Spinoza’s choice of a geometric method serves two purposes. One, its adequate description of the movements of figures in space/extension mirrors the experience of human beings moving through that very same space. And two, he recognizes that people are essentially geometrically oriented beings. The ability that we possess to circumambulate through our personal space is the result of the internal ‘gyroscope’ or our sentient projicience. Elsewhere, I have termed this ‘human geometry’.

Yes, there is indeed a cohesive structure within the form of the “Ethics” and the propositions do need to be seen as interlocking pieces which need to be ‘connected’ in order to maintain their internal logical consistency. But that in no way resembles the mathematically oriented process of seeking out a ‘formally logical’ and necessary flow from proposition to proposition in the order in which they are presented. That is why Baruch’s own commentary within propositions, notes and scholia make reference to parts of completely different chapters in the “Ethics”. His system is no simple top to bottom descending order arrangement. A study of the “Ethics” requires a much more flexible intellectual capacity than that.

Finally, it is only through the agency-in-act of the individual human mind that Spinoza’s masterful demonstration comes alive!

**Reason**

-Most authors’ miscomprehension of ‘reason’, considering it an abstract concept, rather than Spinoza’s ‘active rational agency’ which is a function of the mind, and an unerring one at that. One offshoot which springs from this misapprehension causes most commentators to accuse Baruch of rampant dogmatism.

This accusation occurs because the subtle simplicity and elegant ‘reasoning’ which Spinoza employs, sails right by the typical ‘scholar’.

In his sparsely worded yet perfectly clearly demonstrated, Definitions I, III, IV in Part 1, he deftly lays out why the capacity to intuitionally detect, and even further, to conceive clearly the existence of ‘Deus sive Natura’ should remove all doubt about not only its existence, but its infinite, omnipotent being and essence. And ultimately the enormous potency and efficacy of the function of reason which provides the analysis and verification of the necessary existence of ‘essence’.

*“The knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence that each idea involves is adequate and perfect” (IIp46). “The human Mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence” (IIp47).*

[Note- Clarification- In Spinoza’s system, ‘reason’ serves as an operating sub-segment within the human mind’s capacity to understand ‘intuitionally’ and thus with a degree of certainty. This innate ‘talent’, acts as a guiding force which is aligns at the micro-level with the intelligence which permeates the conscious creation and re-creation in the universe. It must never be confused with a process of drawing logical inferences. It can be readily compared in function to an organ like the brain which supports it, or the lungs which allow us to breathe; or even to the act of procreation which allows humanity to continue.]

**Explanation**- The accusations iterated and reiterated against Spinoza’s system lean heavily on the across the board condemnation of his observation about the one, ‘self-caused’ substance and its undeniable existence, as some arrogant dogmatism. Aside from the question which automatically comes to mind for any person who would posit this, ‘Then why would you write about such a person and lay stake to the claim of being a ‘Spinoza Scholar’; that is, if your view of his definitions and axioms in Part 1 Concerning God offend your sensibilities to such an extent?

At first glance, when reflecting on this egregiously displayed outright rejection of Spinoza’s depiction of the primal components within the nature of the divinity, it appears mystifying that so many authors could not even recognize the capacity within their own minds to entertain self-evident truth when it stares them in the face. Only a writer preoccupied with their own preconceptions could miss the import in Baruch’s brilliant deduction.

But then, for me, the fog clears and once again the final line of the “Ethics” resounds with that hammering ring; *“but all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”* What Spinoza captured in this sentiment is the forlorn fact that recognizing the presence within a person, of the existence and operation of their own mind and its blessed capacity to entertain the truth, still lies beyond the reach of many, if not most of us. *“Many are called, few are chosen.”* Matthew 22:14

And yet, at the same time it might be considered to be the case that a person, highly trained in philosophy, who has achieved the highest level of attainment, the Doctorate, might be able, by employing ‘intellectual detachment’ and reserving judgement, to read nothing into Spinoza’s words and to attempt to coax from only what he said; some semblance of his intended meaning. But this never seems to happen.

Unfortunately, these scribes’ mentalities remain stubbornly and superstitiously locked into Descartes unsustainable duality, wherein the mind barely knows itself or its purported demon and knows next to nothing whatsoever of the ‘sensible’ world. They remain handcuffed to an aberration.

In the final analysis a grasp of Baruch’s genius, and whether it comes to light, just may hinge on whether someone comes to Spinoza’s masterwork either to learn, or, as is typical, to judge.

**The Upshot**- Commentators who have accused Spinoza of dogmatism have done so not because they have performed a careful and unbiased study of his masterful and simply stated deductions concerning substance and attribute, but rather because of their stubborn insistence of the correctness of the preformed attitudes with which they have approached the “Ethics”. These attitudes, because they are so widely shared and on this ‘collegiality’ alone, not on any demonstration of veracity in their judgements, hold sway in the Academic papers, conferences and classrooms where they are being passed off as Spinoza scholarship.

**For the Spinoza student**- Spinoza’s ‘natural light of reason’, once it has become consciously tapped into and harnessed, affords any individual the ability to understand, with an unerring certainty, precisely which courses of action to follow to improve our capacity to make intelligent decisions and which conscious actions will result in a more stable and psychologically mature outlook on life.

It would not be incorrect to state that ‘light of reason’ is akin to that ‘little’ voice which speaks to us and encourages us to ‘do the right thing’.

Finally, you must see and feel Spinoza’s ‘understanding’ in operation in your own mind if there is any hope of grasping the essence of the ‘natural light of reason’. Find that one thing that you know in your mind and that you understand, with a certainty that cannot be shaken. That is where this pilgrimage begins. Spinoza’s is no theory of philosophy. It is a complete and accurate replication of life as we know it; if only we can come to know it as he urges us to. His system has been compared, in analogy, to a corerrey.

**Twin Attributes**

**Twin Attributes—**Patent misunderstanding of Spinoza’s twin attributes of ‘Thought and ‘Extension’; considering them as ‘parallel predications’ of substance, or as ‘accidents’ adjectivally attached to god, somehow.

**Explanation-** It is in some strange measure quite ironic that once the time has been spent in disassembling the entire “Ethics”, examining, researching, analyzing and assessing all of it, only to thereupon re-assemble the entire manuscript, that is, once this lengthy and challenging process is completed the entire structure stands clear in all its unity and logical integrity; not even to mention its absolute truth value and metaphysical certainty. The irony lies in the absolutely obvious and somewhat commonsensical manner in which each of the innumerable pieces all fit so neatly, one inside the other, all in ‘immanence’. So much alike to peas in their pod basking in the sunlight and rain.

That is, that the relationship among god/substance/nature, and its infinite attributes, and their infinite modalities, and their finite modes, every bit of it, seems so obvious; and it more or less is!

And that is precisely what Spinoza meant by ‘self-evident’ truth.

Thought and Extension

Two Peas in a Pod

See the pretty peas in their pod

Nestled together like the Attributes of god

We can’t see them in their Substance lair

And yet intuition tells us they’re there.

Now to the little child’s delight

The pod is opened to her sight

Perfect spheres, round perfect mirrors,

Reflecting god’s light

Now, bubbling softly in the butter, salt and pepper,

Into the child’s mouth

Where they’ll disappear forever

Becoming one within her self

In body and mind together.

What’s left is just a picture in her mind,

An image of that perfection left behind

All those perfect little peas

And all of one kind!

**Explanation** (cont.)- But let us not get ahead of ourselves. For now, and in order to understand the twin attributes, we need to examine how these infinite attributes, can possibly bear any kinship with substance, especially since substance is indivisible and virtually undetectable. To add to that another degree of difficulty, the attributes themselves even in their infinity simultaneously are linked together under substance, reflect substance in that they are comprised of the same essence, and yet bear no resemblance one to another; all of this occurring simultaneously, infinitely and eternally.

We will get to this conundrum in just a moment, but again it must be remarked that this degree of difficulty does not admit for any measure of exoneration for those multiple commentators who simply cannot get this right. No matter what Baruch placed on the printed page, in not too challenging a form of Latin, or in most cases for the reader of a capably translated version in English, they consistently insist on ignoring Spinoza’s language and overriding his meaning with a manufactured version of their own.

Or as Robert J. McShea puts it, in his, “The Political Philosophy of Spinoza”, (P. 7)

*“But the principal difficulty, for most of us, arises out of the disgraceful shortness of our span of attention, a lack of practice in precise thought following from definition, and the human tendency to reduce all thoughts to the level of slogan or cliché.*

*Too much should not be made of these problems. A grasp of the central message of the ‘Ethics’, Spinoza’s most difficult major work, can be had on a first reading and without any previous study of philosophy, by any sufficiently motivated student.”*

The variety of misapprehensions proceed in a range from conceiving the twin attributes, (our focal point), as assertions predicated of substance, to the one attribute, somehow taking preference in Spinoza’s mind. That is, ‘Thought’ taking precedence over the other, ‘Extension’, in complete contradiction of Spinoza’s insistence that both attributes, considered as referenced to substance are precisely the same thing, expressed in two differing formats as either a mind, or a body.

Some have even suggested that there is no difference whatsoever between substance and attribute. While at the most extreme ranges of this misapprehension, they devolve into Descartes duality, or two completely different and separate substances.

Suffice it to say that it is beyond the remit of this author to sort out these confusions, so that the best that can be attempted here is to attempt, ‘Doing Philosophy’, the second method of analysis mentioned at the outset of this paper. With that, let us read carefully what Baruch has to say on the status between substance and attribute to see if this can become sorted.

**VI.** *“By God, I mean a being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality.”*

Explanation*—"I say absolutely infinite, not infinite after its kind: for, of a thing infinite only after its kind, infinite attributes may be denied; but that which is absolutely infinite, contains in its essence whatever expresses reality, and involves no negation.”* Ethics Part 1- Def. VI

Explanation- With the cheery little poetic interlude behind us, we find ourselves now back to the grim task of correcting misapprehensions.

When it comes to the twin attributes of Thought and Extension, Spinoza invokes for them a status which simply cannot be comprehended by most minds. He says that as Infinite Attributes, that each one must be both ‘infinite in its own kind’ while at the same time being identical to its correlate. The easy way to dodge the enormous difficulty involved in resolving what appears to be a paradox of the first order is to simply ignore Spinoza’s words and create some categorical description which suits your sensibilities. And so, that is exactly what most commentators have done.

Their new categorization they term Attribute Parallelism and here is how it operates; even though this creation bears absolutely no resemblance to what Spinoza explicated.

The two attributes are claimed to be predicates of Substance, and from there are claimed to move in an infinitely progressive parallel structure. This conforms with one aspect of how Spinoza explained that the twin attributes are interrelated, that;

**Prop. VII.** *The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.*

*”Substance thinking, and substance extended are one and the same substance, comprehended now through one attribute, now through the other. So, also, a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, though expressed in two ways.” [Note to prop. VII]*

So yes, this parallelism theory does indeed direct itself to one property of the twin attributes. But that merely serves to distort their true nature and relationship.

To speak in reference to plane geometry, parallelism falls completely short on two vital aspects of the twin correlate attributes. First, in that they are, in fact, ‘Twins’. They are identical and in any given parallelism there is no possibility of convergence, that is, parallel lines never touch, so nothing about them can be defined as identical, except of course in some bizarrely configured alternative geometry which Baruch did not have in mind. And, second in the undeniable fact that the attributes of Thought and Extension do share a point of convergence; and essentially form the union between the human mind and body; the ‘conatus sese conservendi’ or self-assertive urge, where thought, desire and appetite meet in the nexus which drives not only human, but all of the ‘creata’ in its desire to persist in existence and to succeed at doing so.

**Prop. XXI.** “*This idea of the mind is united to the mind in the same way as the mind is united to the body.”*

*Proof.—"That the mind is united to the body we have shown from the fact, that the body is the object of the mind (*[*II. xii.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_12) *and* [*xiii.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_13)*) ; and so for the same reason the idea of the mind must be united with its object, that is, with the mind in the same manner as the mind is united to the body.” Q.E.D.*

*Note.—"This proposition is comprehended much more clearly from what we have said in the* [*note to II. vii.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_7n) *We there showed that the idea of body and body, that is, mind and body (*[*II. xiii.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_13)*), are one and the same individual conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension ; wherefore the idea of the mind and the mind itself are one and the same thing, which is conceived under one and the same attribute, namely, thought. The idea of the mind, I repeat, and the mind itself are in God by the same necessity and follow from him from the same power of thinking. Strictly speaking, the idea of the mind, that is, the idea of an idea, is nothing but the distinctive quality (forma) of the idea in so far as it is conceived as a mode of thought without reference to the object ; if a man knows anything, he, by that very fact, knows that he knows it, and at the same time knows that he knows that he knows it, and so on to infinity. But I will treat of this hereafter.” [Ethics, Part 2]*

The Magnifying Glass Analogy

This little simplistic analogy was developed to illustrate in physical form, the relationship among; substance, attribute and mode. It is an approximation/illustration not intended to duplicate the interrelationship among the Triumvirate members. It is thus admittedly *‘of the imagination’*. It appears in this author’s, ‘To Discern Divinity” A Discussion and Interpolation of Spinoza’s “Ethics” Pat 1- Concerning God. (p.84)

We will attempt to carry this illustration/analogy as far as possible. Its limitations having been noted above, let us still hope that it will yet provide some assistance by speaking in simple language about these three relationships and their reciprocal optical/visual fluctuations which are pivotal for us as we attempt to grasp Spinoza’s intended meaning.

Consider the hand-held magnifying glass, the one which many of us owned as young natural science students; the one which we used to examine closely all manner of tiny wonders, too miniscule for the eye to observe without amplification. We investigated insect appendages and blades of grass and variegated leaf patterns and hair follicles and fingerprints, and we saw in a new light, the fascinating nature of their complex structures.

The magnifying lens acted as our mediator permitting us to experience an entire new realm. It captured the sunlight and enhanced its power which converged on the surface of the glass to illuminate the subject matter. Without the sunlight and the glass, we would have never experienced nature’s wonders up close and so intimately.

Thus, we arrive at our analogy segment.

For ‘nature’s wonders’ we will let stand ‘mode’ for the magnifying lens ‘attribute’; and for the sun’s light ‘substance’. Now; how does the magnifying lens work?

A magnifying glass is a convex lens. Convex means curved outward, like the underside of a upturned spoon or the dome of a sports stadium. It is the opposite of concave or curved inward.

A lens is a medium that allows light rays to pass through it. It effectively bends, or refracts the rays as they pass. A magnifying glass uses a convex lens because these lenses cause light rays to converge, or come together at a ‘focal’ point.

A magnifying glass, in effect, tricks the eye into seeing what is not there. Light rays from the object enter the glass in parallel but are refracted by the lens so that they converge as they exit, and create a “virtual image” on the retina of the viewer’s eye. This image appears to be larger than the object itself because of simple geometry: the eyes trace the light rays back in straight lines to the virtual image, which is farther away from the eyes than the object is and thus makes the object appear bigger.

To continue the analogy and to refresh our memories, let us revisit Baruch’s definitions 3, 4 and 5:

*“By ‘substance’, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself.”*

*“By ‘attribute’, I mean that which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance.”*

*“By ‘mode’, I mean the modification of substance, or that which exists in, and is conceived through, something other than itself.”*

In our analogy the sunlight which ‘causes’ both the material elements which comprise the magnifying glass; wood, metal, sand, silica, and the observed ‘object’ are both subsumed under substance, [the sun]. The attribute, [magnifying glass] displays the fine points of the object, and serves as the proximate cause of the magnification, and object being observed under magnification serves as the modification.

This verbal depiction of this inter-reciprocal relationship could go on from here, but it will be more effective if the reader simply pictures in your minds-eye what is being described.

It may be simple to the point of being crude, but this as close as can be attempted at this point in time to depicting the relationship among substance, attribute and mode. Hopefully it is better that nothing at all.

**The Upshot-** The twin attributes both conjoin to form a human individual, that is its mind and body, they simultaneously comprise our entire world; our thoughts and ideas, and our experience, in the form of the objects, people and ‘things’ we witness daily. At the level of twin Attributes out of the infinite Attributes of God, we do not directly experience them, but we can clearly intuitively conceive their presence and existence.

The essentially irresponsible distortion of the nature of and the relationship between the correlate twin attributes of Thought and Extension in the ‘extant’ literature, make it impossible for any reader to grasp the truly, not less than miraculous, relationship which Spinoza correctly intuited between ‘Substance’ and its ‘Attributes’. Instead of the intricately woven interlacing which allows the attributes to reflect substance while never abrogating its indivisibility, which ‘refection’ shines an irresolute self-evidence upon their relationship and which compels the human mind within its capacity for ‘intuitive understanding’, to stand in awe, reverence and piety, in recognition of the individual’s presence and role in such majesty; that is instead of this once in a lifetime experience, these commentators leave us with a completely ‘pedestrian’ interpretation of the attributes as either, ‘accidents’ or ‘predications’ of substance. All of the elegant majesty is drained away by the common place, and that is indeed a pity.

**For the Student**- Challenge yourself to include in your studies one or all three of the following books;

“Spinoza, The Elements of His Philosophy”, Harold Foster Hallett

“Spinoza’s Philosophy- An Outline”, Errol E Harris

“The Philosophy of Spinoza”, Richard McKeon

Be certain to pay strict attention to how each author clearly explains Baruch’s intended meanings for: Substance, Attribute and their interrelationship.

**Lexicon**

-One of the singularly overlooked features in Baruch’s methodology is his uncanny ability to remain on task in the presentation of his particular demonstration and to the crafting of commonplace language which he tailors to accurately reflect his thinking on the topic under consideration. What is meant by that is that when Spinoza hones in on a topic as in Part One- Concerning God, his focus never strays beyond that subject matter. There is no spillover in definition or linguistic meaning to any term used within the confines of an individual part of the “Ethics”. This means that any explication of his system must not extend definitions or particular word usages into other sections of the Ethics before carefully considering the specific context in which they were employed.

Every single word which he selected, and the definitions of each of these words, is intended to pertain only to Substance/god/Nature within the textual context of Part One and absolutely nothing else. There is no spillover into any other topic whatsoever.

Another way to express this is, that no matter what terminology appears as part of Part One, its intended meaning applies singularly and only to the subject matter in Part One. It is a serious mistake to compare, for example his usage of ‘Substance’ in Part One, with its usage in Part Two.

Spinoza displays at all points on the compass an unwavering and ironclad discipline which never wavers away from the subject matter in any way.

A variation on this lexical myopia which afflicts quite a few commentators appears as they have attributed ‘substance’ to play some direct role in the being of individuals. Whereas Spinoza insists;

**Prop. X.** *The being of substance does not appertain to the essence of man—in other words, substance does not constitute the actual being*[[2]](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#endnote_2) *of man.*

*Proof.* *The being of substance involves necessary existence. If, therefore, the being of substance appertains to the essence of man, substance being granted, man would necessarily be granted also, and, consequently, man would necessarily exist, which is absurd.*

*Corollary. Hence it follows, that the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of the attributes of God. For the being of substance does not belong to the essence of man. That essence therefore is something which is in God, and which without God can neither be nor be conceived, whether it be a modification, or a mode which expresses God's nature in a certain conditioned manner.*

As an even more flagrant example of this confusion and misrepresentation, here is an excerpt from Ethics Part One, Prop. 33, Scholia or Note 1, in which Spinoza explicitly spells out that he will employ the term ‘necessary’ in two ‘mutually exclusive’ ways;

*“A thing is termed necessary either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause. For a thing’s existence necessarily follows either from its essence and definition or from a given efficient cause.”*

**Explanation**- Germaine to our discussion and specific to the point is the fact that **Spinoza employs terminology to suit specific needs for explication within his system and that it cannot be constrained by an artificial demand for univocality.**

Two parts of the ‘note’ above require our focus;

1. *‘necessary…by reason of its essence’*, taken together with, ‘…*necessarily follows from its essence and definition’…*

Here Spinoza points up that the essence of substance follows necessarily, because its existence involves being. That is its essence is one and the same with the essence of God. And because a ‘good definition’ captures specifically and only the ‘essence’ of the thing being defined. (TIE, page 35, Par. 1)

*2- ‘necessary…by reason of its cause’*, taken together with…*’or from a given efficient cause.’*

Here Spinoza points up that the conditioned causality of a contingent being (human) hinges entirely on the necessity involved in its cause. As ‘substance’ serves as the efficient cause of constrained beings, we can now clearly determine that Spinoza employs this term, in two distinctly different applications. We can mark them for clarification as, ‘Necessary’ and ‘necessary’.

What Baruch will go on to explain is twofold, the first usage of Necessary involves essence. Its existence follows ‘necessarily’ from its self-caused essence. To reiterate this vital usage; an accurate definition captures only the essence of a ‘thing’ (any object under consideration). It can therefore be ‘comprehended intuitively by the human mind. It therefore does not require any ‘propping-up’ from its proximate cause or by any external ‘proof’. Let the notion of Deus sive Natura’, stand as an example of Necessary existence.

In a completely different usage of ‘necessary’ Spinoza explains that contingent beings, that is, people’s essence, does not involve existence, but relies solely on the ‘necessary’ conditions within substance which serves as contingent being’s efficient cause (Part Two, Axiom 1). Granted that these are difficult and finely nuanced differences, but that gives no supposed Spinoza scholar the right to ‘gloss’ over the distinction.

To be perfectly clear on this issue it must be stated categorically that this twofold meaning attributed by Spinoza to necessary is not confined to this one term. Include in this assessment the terms; Essence, essence; Being, being; Necessity, necessity, Duration, duration, etc.

On the other hand, at the opposite end of the confused commentator spectrum where clarity on Spinoza’s genius and uniquely honed linguistic turns, we find Robert J. McShea. Here is how he characterizes Spinoza’s usage of scholastic terminology and argumentation and theoretical technique honed over more than a century, to create something new and masterful.

*“Because Spinoza’s metaphysics is directed to the validations of these postulates (metaphysical assumptions) as prelude to serious scientific study:*

*-That the world it studies is one- Otherwise- two incompatible sciences*

*-All independent variables must be excluded- Miracles, swerving atoms, free will*

*-Nature and man, to be studied objectively; no immanent value or purpose*

*-Human mind with capacity for truth; reason itself shown to be internally consistent*

*-Uniform and objective rules of evidence adopted; a logic of science*

*-Scientific enterprise must be worthwhile; ethical research seeks to unearth value*

*-Science must produce ‘the good’; advancing the welfare of existent people*

*These assumptions having been established positions Spinoza’s metaphysics as a philosophy of science.*

*By retaining the word “God” in his philosophical vocabulary, Spinoza was able to draw on the vast fund of analytic sophistication achieved in the course of centuries of theological disputation. Compared to that development, the new philosophies of science, even when done by a Bacon or a Descartes, were naïve.*

*Spinoza’s translation of the conceptual apparatus and techniques of analysis, so painstakingly and brilliantly built up by generations of scholastics, into the secular idiom of a philosophy of science is an awe-inspiring intellectual accomplishment.”* Robert J McShea, “The Political Philosophy of Spinoza”, (pp. 41-43)

This excerpt provides us with a clear and concise rendition of the methodology being proposed here as a replacement for the currently predominant method termed herein ‘comparative analysis’.

Notice how McShea directs his entire focus solely on the actual words of Spinoza. What he recognizes in Baruch’s metaphysics is the beginning outline to an holistic scientific method. This includes transparent guidelines which taken together form an inclusive system. A system far more sophisticated than the Scientific method of Descartes, Hume, and all of their descendants combined.

And Dr. McShea coaxed every bit of it on the merits of Spinoza’s system and his power of reading comprehension, introspection and rational analysis. He did indeed refer to the scholastics but the reference made was not to claim that Baruch’s work harkened back to some other epoch, but rather that Baruch created the first coherent philosophy of science purely through the potency of his own genius and powers of observation. McShea sees Spinoza as ‘timeless’.

Academic commentators see him as anachronistic. ‘Therein lies the rub’!

This is ‘Doing Philosophy’ and at a very sophisticated level!

**The upshot**- A simple and straightforward comparison between McShea’s assessment of Spinoza’s lexical talents with these other folks, speaks for itself. It also delivers an excellent example of what true Spinoza Scholarship should look like!

Most commentators exhibit varying degrees of confusion through their mistaken attribution of what they adjudge as lexical or terminological mistakes to Spinoza. This is not the only, but merely the first instance wherein a commentator mistakenly makes demands from a twentieth century perspective, in this case the application of the strictures of formal logical demands for univocal definition; and places this demand on a seventeenth century philosophy. Their commentary reflects this mistaken attribution and gross error.

**For the student**- Focus on each Part of the “Ethics” as a stand-alone piece. Do not attempt any bridging from one Part to another, either of definitions or content. Master the content one at a time. Once each part has been comprehended clearly in its own stand-alone integrity, then will be the time to begin to integrate the ‘Parts’ of the Ethics to complete an overall comprehension of its totality.

There will be a tremendous amount of reflection, analysis and introspection required in order to grasp the unity of thought within the confines of each of the five ‘Chapters’ in the Ethics. How they fit together will begin to emerge only after this part of the exercise is completed.

**Determination/Necessity**

-Misconstruing the distinction between ‘determination/determined’ as Baruch employed them, and today’s contextual connotation of ‘causal determinism’; wherein every human action has a pre-determined origin and, Spinoza’s usage of ‘determined to exist’.

By reading into his usage and assigning the prefix ‘pre’ to Baruch’s determined, these commentators have proposed the absurd notion that Spinoza conformed to a belief that each one of us is living out a type of pre-taped recording of our own lives.

Baruch’s actual and intended meaning of both determined and determination actually indicate anything which is put into position to act, by its proximate cause, within a prescribed range.

For example, that a fish swims and breaths through gills and that a human being walks upright on two legs and breaths oxygen; these are examples of what Baruch intended by, ‘determined to act’, or again, that the four seasons display beginning and endpoints, like temperature changes, cloud formations, appearance of foliage, etc. These all are ‘effects’ which must have their derivations in some type of higher order causality.

Commentators have thus concluded, amidst their confusion, that Spinoza ascribes to ‘causal determinism’, or a type of preordained existence in which every individual’s act, thought and behavior have been preprogrammed; which is patently absurd.

A Bit more on Determination

**General Explanation**- By interjecting contemporary definitions of determination into 17th Century meanings, many commentators, completely misread Spinoza’s usage of the word determination, along with any of its attendant grammatical parts of speech. This marks quite an achievement in the act of overriding Spinoza’s intended meaning with their own manufactured definitions which completely obfuscate Baruch’s intentions and explication of the relationship between god/substance, and human/contingent, being.

As a result, many authors contend that Spinoza espoused some strange doctrine which contends that all human actions, thoughts and desires are somehow pre-programmed and cannot brook any alteration from their preassigned path through life. They then pronounce Baruch a ‘Causal Determinist’, meanwhile congratulating themselves for their astute observational and interpretational capacities.

1. *By body I mean* ***a mode which expresses in a certain determinate manner the essence of God****, in so far as he is considered as an extended thing.* (Def. 1)

*Corollary. — Hence it follows, that the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of the attributes of God. For the being of substance does not belong to the essence of man. That essence therefore is something which is in God, and which without God can neither be nor be conceived, whether it be a modification,* ***or*** ***a mode which expresses God’s nature in a certain conditioned manner.***

*Note—Everyone must surely admit, that nothing can be or be conceived without God. All men agree that God is the one and only cause of all things, both of their essence and of their existence; that is, God is not only the cause of things in respect to their being made (secundum fieri), but also in respect to their being (secundum esse).*

***-a mode which expresses in a certain determinate manner the essence of God***

***-a mode which expresses God’s nature in a certain conditioned manner***

Explanation- Now to explain this process in Spinoza’s terms we would say that the attribute of extension causes the birth of chemical and physical compositions in all lifeforms which in a descending order from solar system formation down through the physical matter which comprises the elements of which the soils, water, food products, bodies and digestive systems of all lifeforms on earth, ‘express in a necessarily determinant and conditioned manner the nature of god.’

This ‘chain’ of being does not cause itself. All its activity is ‘driven’ by forces which have shaped and which control its formation. This is how Baruch intended us to comprehend how god’s nature both determines and meanwhile serves as the cause in the life of every conceivable lifeform in the universe.

Necessity

*However, I pass over this point. My intention here was only to give a reason for not saying, that that, without which a thing cannot be or be conceived, belongs to the essence of that thing: individual things cannot be or be conceived without God, yet God does not appertain to their essence. I said that “I considered as belonging to the essence of a thing that, which being given, the thing is necessarily given also, and which being removed, the thing is necessarily removed also ; or that without which the thing, and which itself without the thing can neither be, nor be conceived.”(E II, Def.2)*

**Explanation**- Many writers have claimed that Spinoza’s rigidity when it comes to his insistence that proximate causes arising from our individual natures and previous experience which shape our thoughts and behaviors essentially abrogates any possibility for any individual’s exercise of free-will. This assertion concludes that Spinoza’s stance makes it impossible to assign any moral responsibility for our actions.

By confusing Spinoza’s intention, wherein he clearly indicates that the same ‘necessity’ within the bounds of the laws of nature, which control and essentially and severely restrict the self-incepting capability of humans to exert willful control the paths of their existence, these authors have mistakenly proposed that Baruch believed that human behaviors are set in stone or somehow pre-determined.

The completely original usage of the term ‘necessity’ in Spinoza’s parlance refers to the fairly straightforward notion that human behavioral choices are limited based on the original conditions of our individual natures and the proximate causation along with other environmental elements which have shaped and therefore conditioned human existence.

**The Upshot**- Clearly, free will is not the only assignable determinate when it comes to making deliberate choices to act in a morally responsible manner. Commentators, in general, always seek for some ‘generalization’ which they purport to believe will serve to affect all human behavior equally. This search for an abstract ‘coda’ completely overlooks what Spinoza recognized as the only possible determinant for morality, individual responsibility, formed within the nexus of human understanding, that is, our individual compass or ‘true north’.

*Corollary****—"Will and understanding are one and the same.”***  (“Ethics Part 2, Proposition XLIX)

**For the Spinoza student**- When Baruch speaks of ‘freedom born in necessity’ what he means is that believing that we have some type of ‘free will’ does us a disservice. True freedom lies in recognizing the multiple constraints which govern our lives and working consciously to become self-motivated. In so doing we recognize that only through understanding the ‘necessity’ born into each of us do we have any possibility of gaining some measure of freedom. (See “Ethics” Part 2- Prop. 48-49 and the lengthy Note which ends Part 2)

**Logic**

- Demanding that Spinoza’s system respond to the dictates of contemporary ‘formal logical necessity’ while ignoring the wonderful symmetry and self-contained logical consistency within the structure of the “Ethics”. Along with an aligned unrealistic demand; misapprehending as propositional logical assertions, Spinoza’s ‘causally’ interconnected axioms, definitions, propositions, and the deductive flow from ‘necessity’ downward to ‘contingency’.

Spinoza’s system is not a ‘theory’ it is instead an accurate rendering of precisely how the objects in nature are ‘causally’ related. To quote the capable Richard Mason, from, “Spinoza- Logic, Knowledge and Religion”;

*“The necessity in the existence and action of things does not consist in the truth of assertions made about them, but simply in the fact that they have causes. Spinoza’s view was that we can be sure that all individuals have determinates- and so are necessary- though we can never know in full what these are.”*

(Page 61)

Spinoza’s Unique Application of Logical Principles

**Explanation-** Spinoza cautioned against any and all forms of abstraction, which he defined as ‘images’ formed from ‘generalizations’ into virtually meaningless abstract universals. It involves a process steeped in imagination wherein an attempt is made to encapsulate something meaningful through forming a mental construct which includes some feature which claims to apply to all. Examples that he employed include words like; ‘man’, ‘people’, ‘horse’, ‘boy’, as in; ‘man is a being that walks on two feet’, or, ‘most people believe that God is real’. Other instances of this absolutely unreliable process for establishing certainty arise from the fact that each of us forms our own impression of what is meant in the usage of most words.

For example; when a soldier hears the word ‘horse’, battlefields and weapons came to mind; whereas a farmer visualizes fields and plows, and a child pictures ponies or unicorns. Thus words, which are formed in the imagination, should never be held to contain any ‘logical certainty’, no matter how they are framed.. Baruch understood that words are merely ‘conveyances’.

He realized that there is a defined limit to how many objects any human mind can contemplate together at once. This limit naturally leads us to ‘produce’ generalizations which are meant to stand in place of those numbers of objects which we cannot conceive of clearly.

By attempting to stretch some ‘regularity’ across a broad spectrum of entities, what results was an empty category which, in the end, conveys no meaning whatsoever. He advocated, for his view of logic, starting with ‘first principles’ which as opposed to abstraction take the form of concrete universals; like god or nature or substance, or even one of the infinite modalities like, ‘motion and rest’.

For Baruch the relevance of these concrete universals stems from their presence as part of the ‘infinite modalities’ which are linked directly to the Attribute of either ‘Extension’ or ‘Thought’ and thus flow deductively in a direct line from ‘causa sui’ or the ‘self-caused’ entities.

The most prominent feature of these ‘concrete universals’ is that both their essence and existence belong ‘necessarily’ to ‘natura,naturans’ or ‘nature-in-the-agency-of-act. So that moving in a downward flow of deductive reasoning from these ‘first principle’, all of the properties of everything else in the ‘creata’ can be logically deduced.

He believed, no understood, that beginning his philosophy from first principles was the only sure way to avoid the contradictions and confusions which arise from any attempt to begin any investigation from a platform derived from the realm of the ‘sensible’, that is from the everyday objects of sense experience and attempting to apply induction in some ascending order. These sensible objects are infinite in number and to obtain to any certainty it would be necessary to observe and investigate them all, which is impossible. On the other hand the ‘first principles’ are limited in number, contain virtually everything else within their parameters, and are natural starting points for a deductive logical investigation.

In his powerfully presented and carefully argued book, “Spinoza-Logic, Knowledge and Religion”, Richard Mason came to the same conclusion.

Mason seeks to carefully and dispassionately parse certain aspects of Spinoza’s system to see if he can unearth that which compels him to treat Baruch’s thinking with such respect. In the conclusion to Part1- ‘What had to be so’, and in the Conclusions section for that chapter, he presents some fairly startling suppositions concerning the effects on the ‘modern’ philosophical praxis if Spinoza’s causally based logic is admissible and comprises a philosophically acceptable methodology. What follows is a sketch of what Dr. Mason discovered.

*“The intention here has been to show how Spinoza formulated a reasonably coherent, if unfamiliar, account of modalities. We tend to think of Leibnitz as the first modern theorist of modality, and it is undeniable that his overt interest in the subject was far greater than Spinoza’s. But if Spinoza’s account really was coherent then it compared favorably with Leibnitz’ in several ways. We get by without God who has to make choices (with all the attendant theological problems) and with no need for possible worlds. Instead of the dubious notion of concept-or subject-predicate inclusion and analyticity, we see less opaque notion of causal explanation. If only this much is fair then Spinoza deserves more attention.*

*There are also some conclusions of wider interest. In some ways we may feel that the change in perspective in looking through his eyes is almost to see everything in reverse. Assumptions now taken for granted were simply inverted. We tend to see necessity as requiring explanation, whereas he saw contingency as the challenge. We tend to regard de re modality with caution, where he ignored de dicto modality almost completely. We assume a symmetry of definition between necessity and possibility which could have no place in his metaphysics.*

*One reaction could be just to say that he got everything wrong. Or- the same in practice- to think that his views bear so little relation to later ones that they are irrelevant beyond their historical curiosity. [But] a few of his strands can be picked out which might turn out to be more promising than they seem at first.*

*To begin with the primacy of necessity in Spinoza’s system needs to be appreciated. …for Leibnitz, the status of contingency was the problem, rather than necessity. In Spinoza this attitude had reached its consistent extreme. For him, his form of necessity needed no defense: it was self-evident and logically primary. He believed that a cardinal error had been to have overlooked this and to have taken the ‘objects of sense’ as fundamental. In bare summary that presents the most commonplace textbook difference between rationalism and empiricism. We need to see the extremity of his attitude to bring it into sharp focus. Empiricists may take brute contingent facts for granted; they just are. For them, necessity can pose an acute challenge, calling for reduction or explanation. The aim, obviously, would be to provide some account in terms of contingent or empirical facts- perhaps of some special or privileged status- to account for the apparent absoluteness of necessity. When this is turned on its head, the assumptions in it are made more explicit. Spinoza took necessity as clear and primary. In the end for him necessities were ‘causa sui’- their own sufficient explanation.*

*And then there was his attitude toward possibility. What we might think of as ‘logical possibility’ was squeezed out of the picture.*

*We may wish to say that we can represent to ourselves situations which are not possible in nature and which involve no contradiction (in Spinoza’s terms). But in the absence of some very specific assumptions about meaning, the fact that we can say or think things about situations implies nothing about the existence or possible existence of those situations. Spinoza would not deny the capacity of the imagination, or language to portray unlikely states of affairs. What he did was to offer a theoretical framework which drained the capacity of Significance. It is an interesting irony that the limit of possibility for Hume was discovered ‘a priori’, by thought experiment, where for Spinoza it had to be determined by real, practical experiment. Rorty suggested that the invention of the mind by Descartes furnished philosophers with their own special territory. More plausibly, the concept of logical possibility might be argued to be the basic instrument in the philosopher’s laboratory. Spinoza’s exclusion of it implies that the only way to find out what is possible can be to see what happens in the world, not to think about it. If this is right it would cut away the foundation of modern philosophy at least as radically as anything Rorty had in mind.” (Page 37-39)*

**The upshot**- It might seem an odd prescription and quite a big ask to boot, that is to ask of the reader to either forego or to forget most or all of the contemporary Spinozan commentary. But based on Richard Mason’s very lucid depiction of the shaky foundation of purported ‘logical necessity’ which supports most Spinoza commentary it is not as unreasonable a request as it may sound. If, as he states, that Baruch’s philosophical system totally sidesteps any and all reference to formal logical proscription with its syllogisms, hypotheses, proofs; predications, adjectives and completely language based analysis, then a singular and new methodology of study and analysis is called for if gleaning Spinoza’s intended meaning, for he did indeed have an intended meaning; that is, if his ‘intentions’ for the reader’s edification are to be realized.

That new methodology is being termed here, ‘Doing Philosophy’.

**For the Student**- A new methodology for the study and analysis of Baruch’s system would wholly consist in trusting your own intellectual capacity and capability to read for comprehension and to absorb the contents of the ‘Tractatus on the Improvement of the Understanding’ (TIE) and the “Ethics”.

This means that the reader must be the final arbiter of any value proposition constituting itself within Spinoza’s ‘Works’. Only after reaching your own conclusions will it be time to access the extant. And then, only to use those materials as a sounding board with which to make a comparative study of your assessment as to what ‘certainty’ or meaning you have gleaned through your efforts.

**God**

-There are endless confusions which have arisen from Spinoza’s employment of the word God.

By assigning to it differing levels of anthropomorphic superstition, commentators have consistently misrepresented Baruch’s unique understanding of god. Where he clearly intends to convey the undeniable recognition of divinity’s existence and its self-caused role as the Primary Metaphysically Ontological Essence, these writers insist that Spinoza exhibits varying degrees of Pantheism, Pan-psychism, Cabalism and Acosmism.

This may sound simplistic, but the resolution to this mayhem might just be to think of Baruch’s meaning as not too distant from the ‘God’ of the bible.

**Explanation**- First and foremost, and in the simplest language possible we need to be clear on exactly what Spinoza believed about God, plus how and why. Once Baruch grasped the significance of his ability to think and not only to think but to reflect on the origin and nature of all of the immense power in the universe, and he did indeed grasp this clearly, he recognized in this capability that the ‘universe’ had gifted him with a mind which permitted him to cast his thoughts, without constraint, onto any place in the extended world. He understood that in the mark of the potency in his mind stood the only proof required that an infinite, eternal and a universally adapted intelligence had given a humble human being the ‘keys to the kingdom’.

That is the ‘how’, as for the why, it was because he understood that with his gift of intelligence and the ability to think came a power to attain to absolute certainty concerning concepts and realities as far-flung as back to the origins of our universe.

But better than this author attempting to depict Baruch’s belief, let us consider what he thought and said, in his own words;

What follows is excerpts from two of Spinoza’s collection of correspondence; Letters, Ep. XLII and Ep. XLIII. In this exchange with de Velthuysen. This Doctor accused Spinoza by stating that *…”in order to avoid the fault of superstition he seems to have cast off all religion.”*

This essentially infuriated Baruch, to be so accused and so he wrote;

*“What he understands by religion what by superstition I do not know. Does he, I ask, cast off all religion who maintains that God must be acknowledged as the highest good and that he must be loved as such with a free mind? And that in this alone our highest felicity and highest liberty consist? Further that the reward of virtue is virtue itself, and the punishment of folly and weakness is folly itself? And lastly that everyone ought to love his neighbor and obey the law?”*

Spinoza was neither an atheist nor an agnostic, nor was he, *‘a God intoxicated man.’* He was a realist of the first order who clearly understood that to be alive and to think, to act, to will and therefore to live the fullest life can only be the fruit of a gift which the Divinity provides freely to each and all of us.

Natural religious belief in god is a reasonable outgrowth from this understanding. It is far from superstitious.

**The upshot**- Lost in all the misrepresentations of Baruch’s reasoning behind his use of the term, God, lies a missed opportunity of stunning proportion. When Spinoza invokes the notion of a ‘true religion’ in the TTP what he is calling for is a non-sectarian sense of ‘piety and humility’ and a guide for correct living in light of the magnificence of the ‘creata’ and of the human role as the embodiment of ‘intelligence’in the presence of ‘reason’ and ‘intuitive understanding’ within the mind.

This comes as a gift, at birth, to virtually everyone on this planet. He could see that carving a role for religion to be practiced in any ‘state’ government was a commonsense way of gaining the populace’ trust and commitment to the civitas.

**For the student**- Focus part of your attention, as your study of the “Ethics” is on-going, towards the Tractatus Theologico Politicus. Pay close attention to Baruch’s depiction of God’s nature and of his setting out of the role of religion in any state government. Couple your assessment of ‘god’ in this the TTP with your takeaway from “Ethics” Part1-Concerning God. How do the two measure up?

**Freedom/Necessity**

Absolute befuddlement over Baruch’s pairing of Freedom with Necessity; and yet, as with most of Spinoza’s system once a commentator passes by or disregards one of Baruch’s salient points, this incredulity is what results. It is true that Spinoza’s employment of the term ‘freedom’ is quite unique; but he does spell it out quite clearly. Many people equate freedom with some type of open-ended and completely unrestricted capability to consciously and actively create completely new horizons; these ‘freeform’ measures are thought to be activated without any attachment to anything else whatsoever.

What Baruch intends by ‘freedom’ indicates the ability to act in the conscious knowledge that those actions are conducted in the full light of certain previously existent causes which when comprehended allow for understanding and acceptance.

The greatest Spinoza scholar of any age, the honorable Harold Foster Hallett advocated ‘intellectual detachment’ as the preferred mindset with which to approach Baruch’s philosophy. It should go without saying, if the commentators to whom this essay is directed had practiced this approach then none of this desultory polemic would be necessary.

At any rate, in response to the accusation made against Spinoza’s pairing of ‘Freedom’ and ‘Necessity’ let us permit the great humanist to respond in his own words.

First, a segment of a letter written to Spinoza from Lambert de Veltthuysen, in 1671, (Ep. XLII)

“He declares (Spinoza) that the form, appearance and order of the world are clearly necessary, equally with the Nature of God’s choice (arbitrium); and thence he expressly pronounces that all things occur by insuperable necessity and inevitable fate.”

Spinoza’s reply emphatically denies the allegation:

*“The basis of his argument is this, that he thinks I take away liberty from God and subject him to fate. This is plainly false. For I maintain that all things follow with inevitable necessity from God’s nature, just as everybody asserts that it follows from God’s nature that he understands himself: which clearly nobody denies does follow from the divine nature of necessity, and yet nobody conceives that God is compelled by some fate, but (rather) that he understands himself entirely freely, although necessarily.”* (Ep. XLIII)

And again, he explains to Hugo Boxel, who had similarly misunderstood him:

*“By what reason you try to persuade me to believe that ‘fortuitous’ and ‘necessary’ are not contraries remains hidden from me. As soon as I see that the three angles of a triangle are necessarily equal to two right angles, I also deny that this happens to be so by chance. Similarly, as soon as I observe that heat is the necessary effect of fire, I also deny that it occurs accidentally. That ‘necessary’ and ‘free’ are two contraries seems no less absurd and opposed to reason: for nobody can deny that God knows himself and everything else freely, and yet all concede by common consent that God knows himself necessarily. Consequently, you seem to me to make no distinction between compulsion or force and necessity. That man wishes to live, or love, etc. is not a compulsory activity, but it is nevertheless necessary, and much more so that God wishes to be, to know and to act.”* (Ep. LVI)

**Explanation**- Most people assume that freedom and necessity are dialectically opposed. Freedom connotes the lack of any form of attachment whereas necessity connotes the opposite or an anchored attachment. This contemporary usage gives rise to an understandable confusion with Baruch’s pairing of freedom and necessity.

For Baruch, freedom and necessity conjoin as a recognition by individuals that the causes in our lives have brought us to where we are today and that any ‘choices’ which we make are heavily influenced, almost to the point of being determined by what came before. This recognition can bring us to a sense of ‘freedom’ based in the embracing of our conditioned existence. This understanding informs our selection among a limited range of selections on how best to live.

**The upshot**- Rather than living under the illusion that our lives are evolving as some sort of ‘freestyle’ adventure, in which we usually find ourselves dissatisfied with outcomes in which we mistakenly believed that we had chosen the best and now must live under the conditions which eventuated as the worst desirable. Instead we can discover the freedom in necessity which derives by living in conformity with the ‘natural dictates of reason’ which more or less unfailingly apprise us of the one choice in thinking, acting and behaving that will bring about the optimum benefit.

**For the student**- The common sense experience of a belief that we , as humans, own a natural right, to be free; in what we think, say and do, has nothing to counter it inside our minds. As such, no alarm sounds and alerts us to the sad news that this is not the case. There may be no day to day repercussions in our lives for harboring this belief.

But when trouble strikes in the form of some mental anguish, which we just cannot ‘shake-off’, that would be the time to remember this warning. All of our thoughts and actions and behaviors are severely constrained by the events and environmental causes which shaped who we are as people. Any hoped for relief from mental trauma of any kind lies in this recognition and in examining the memories which haunt us in the present day.

**Morals**

Commentators across the board have decried the lack of any recognizable or abstractable, prescriptive moral code in Spinoza’s ethics; thereby mistaking, as some type of ‘psychological egoism’, his universally applicable and innate moral injunction based in Natural Right and the organically and conatively driven imperative to follow the ‘Dictates of Reason’; that is, to serve the needs of others equally while following what serves the individual’s need to self-sustain. The dictates of reason, perhaps better understood as ‘guided intelligence’ derives from Spinoza’s notion of ‘natural right and power’, which in its turn derives directly from the divine law, written, as it were, into the faculty of reason, innate in all. This divine law dictates that everyone should ‘love their neighbor as themselves and act to protect that neighbor’s rights’. No human-derived synthetically declared prescriptive coda can have more force behind it than the divine law; Spinoza said this in the Theological/Political Treatise;

 *Nevertheless, no one can doubt that it is much better for us to live according to the laws and assured dictates of* [*reason*](http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/ethidx2.htm#knowledge2)*, for, as we said, they have men’s true good for their object. Moreover, everyone wishes to live as far as possible securely beyond the reach of fear, and this would be quite impossible so long as everyone did everything he liked, and reason’s claim was lowered to a par with those of hatred and anger; there is no one who is not ill at ease in the midst of enmity, hatred, anger, and deceit, and who does not seek to avoid them as much as he can. When we reflect that men without mutual help, or the aid of* [*reason*](http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/ethidx2.htm#knowledge2)*, must needs live most miserably, as we clearly proved in Chap. 5., we shall plainly see that men must necessarily come to an agreement to live together as securely and well as possible if they are to enjoy as a whole the* [*rights*](http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/tptidx.htm#naturalright) *which naturally belong to them as individuals, and their life should be no more conditioned by the force and* [*desire*](http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/ethidx2.htm#desire) *of individuals, but by the power and will of the whole body. This end they will be unable to attain if* [*desire*](http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/ethidx2.htm#desire) *be their only guide (for by the laws of* [*desire*](http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/ethidx2.htm#desire) *each man is drawn in a different direction); they must, therefore, most firmly decree and establish that they will be guided in everything by* [*reason*](http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/ethidx2.htm#knowledge2) *(which nobody will dare openly to repudiate lest he should be taken for a madman), and will restrain any desire which is injurious to a man’s fellows, that they will do to all as they would be done by, and that they will defend their neighbours* [*rights*](http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/tptidx.htm#naturalright) *as their own. (*TTP Chap. 16- P. 08)

Please read the following from the “Ethics”, and, dear reader, then ask yourself; how could anyone who had carefully read and reflected on this segment have ever come to the conclusion that Spinoza advocated ‘psychological egoism’?

**Prop. XXXVII.** *The good which every man, who follows after virtue, desires for himself he will also desire for other men, and so much the more, in proportion as he has a greater knowledge of God.*

(Ethics Part Four)

Ethics Part Four- Appendix

*“What have said in this Part concerning the right way of life has not been arranged, so as to admit of being seen at one view, but has been set forth piece-meal, according as I thought each Proposition could most readily be deduced from what preceded it. I propose, therefore, to rearrange my remarks and to bring them under leading heads.*

1. *All our endeavours or desires so follow from the necessity of our nature, that they can be understood either through it alone, as their proximate cause, or by virtue of our being a part of nature, which cannot be adequately conceived through itself without other individuals.*

***II.*** *Desires, which follow from our nature in such a manner, that they can be understood through it alone, are those which are referred to the mind, in so far as the latter is conceived to consist of adequate ideas : the remaining desires are only referred to the mind, in so far as it conceives things inadequately, and their force and increase are generally defined not by the power of man, but by the power of things external to us : wherefore the former are rightly called actions, the latter passions, for the former always indicate our power, the latter, on the other hand, show our infirmity and fragmentary knowledge.*

***III.*** *Our actions, that is, those desires which are defined by man’s power or reason, are always good. The rest may be either good or bad.*

***IV.*** *Thus in life it is before all things useful to perfect the understanding, or reason, as far as we can, and in this alone man’s highest happiness or blessedness consists, indeed blessedness is nothing else but the contentment of spirit, which arises from the intuitive knowledge of God : now, to perfect the understanding is nothing else but to understand God, God’s attributes, and the actions which follow from the necessity of his nature. Wherefore of a man, who is led by reason, the ultimate aim or highest desire, whereby he seeks to govern all his fellows, is that whereby he is brought to the adequate conception of himself and of all things within the scope of his intelligence.*

***V.*** *Therefore, without intelligence there is not rational life : and things are only good, in so far as they aid man in his enjoyment of the intellectual life, which is defined by intelligence. Contrariwise, whatsoever things hinder man’s perfecting of his reason, and capability to enjoy the rational life, are alone called evil.*

***VI.*** *As all things whereof man is the efficient cause are necessarily good, no evil can befall man except through external causes ; namely, by virtue of man being a part of universal nature, whose laws human nature is compelled to obey, and to conform to in almost infinite ways.*

***VII.*** *It is impossible, that man should not be a part of nature, or that he should not follow her general order ; but if he be thrown among individuals whose nature is in harmony with his own, his power of action will thereby be aided and fostered, whereas, if he be thrown among such as are but very little in harmony with his nature, he will hardly be able to accommodate himself to them without undergoing a great change himself.*

***VIII.*** *Whatsoever in nature we deem to be evil, or to be capable of injuring our faculty for existing and enjoying the rational life, we may endeavor to remove in whatever way seems safest to us ; on the other hand, whatsoever we deem to be good or useful for preserving our being, and enabling us to enjoy the rational life, we may appropriate to our use and employ as we think best. Everyone without exception may, by sovereign right of nature, do whatsoever he thinks will advance his own interest.*

 ***IX.*** *Nothing can be in more harmony with the nature of any given thing than other individuals of the same species ; therefore for man in the preservation of his being and the enjoyment of the rational life there is nothing more useful than his fellow-man who is led by reason. Further, as we know not anything among individual things which is more excellent than a man led by reason, no man can better display the power of his skill and disposition, than in so training men, that they come at last to live under the dominion of their own reason.*

 ***XI.*** *Yet minds are not conquered by force, but by love and high-mindedness.”*

[Note- It should be apparent at this point that none of those who support the psychological egoism theory have ever carefully read the Ethics. This marks another trap and pitfall in the Collegiality driven Comparative Analysis method, taking an ‘established’ expert’s word, instead of carefully, ‘*doing philosophy’*.

**The upshot**- The accusation that Spinoza’s notion of ‘conatus’, which describes the built-in and organic propensity within human nature, towards seeking whatever means possible to ‘continue in existence’, leads invariably to psychological egoism and is therefore irreconcilable with any type of moral coda. This strange assertion makes absolutely no sense to anyone who has made a careful reading of the “Ethics’ and the TTP. But as can be seen from the accumulated number of the delusions under which most commentators are laboring, they all appear to carry some sort of weight of authority and have done extensive damage to Baruch’s reputation while at the same time, they have cast aspersions on the usefulness of his philosophical insights.

**For the Student**- Just another reminder to limit the use of secondary or ‘extant’ materials until such time as you have completed your own full-blown study of Spinoza’s system.

are under the sway of outside influences, they part company and struggle; at odds with one another. Their presence is barely detectable. We innocently assume them to be separable. We are confident that through an act of will we can ‘change our minds’. We do have the power to forge within us the choice to change our behavior but this is driven by the acknowledgement of a cause that forces us to recognize that to remain on the same path constitutes folly**.**

Therefore, to conceive of some type of ‘free will’ separable from that nexus, with an ability to act on its own volition is an illusion. It may sound a desirable thing to have, but it is not an option; and yet, to our advanatage, choosing our direction in life carefully, is within the compass of our control.

**Evil/Power/Conatus**

Commentators have ascribed various admixtures of the following superstitions to Spinoza’s description of God as the ‘immanent cause’ of the universe.

Their conclusions have been that the presence of evil on earth render an absurdity, Spinoza’s claim that god is the cause of everything imaginable in the ‘creata’. Sounds somehow credible, so let us examine Baruch’s depiction of God’s power and how it becomes diffused into all of nature.

-The ascription of evil on earth as possible only through God’s willing it to be so.

- A residual misconception that the once widely held belief that once an omnipresent, omnipotent judging God is removed as an existent, then ‘evil’ will become rampantly uncontrolled.

- The widely held conviction that ‘the evil that men do’, clearly demonstrates that skepticism towards a belief in any form of divinity is the only reasonable alternative. That because the existence of any type of ‘evil’ whatsoever indicates that God must be the cause of its existence. A very shallow interpretation and limited understanding of the complexities in life co-exists for these doubters, along with a puerile longing for simplistic and unrealistic expectations.

Un or Subconsciously anyone who ascribes to any or all of these variations on the ‘problem of evil, bears within the vestiges of their memory, some shadow image of a belief in an anthropocentric god.

Shaking the misunderstanding of the nature of evil out of any ‘collective’ consciousness is such an enormous task that we will now delve at some length, into the nature and origin of the triumvirate and ‘nexus’ where ‘power’, ‘evil’ and ‘conatus’ conjoin.

**Spinoza and Power**

The Manifestations of the Flow

In the Distillates of God’s Power

From ‘Naturans’ through to the ‘Naturata’

Appendix

*“In the foregoing I have explained the nature and properties of God. I have shown that he necessarily exists, that he is one : that he is, and acts solely by the necessity of his own nature ; that he is the free cause of all things, and how he is so ; that all things are in God, and so depend on him, that without him they could neither exist nor be conceived ; lastly, that* ***all things are predetermined by God, not through his free will or absolute fiat, but from the very nature of God or infinite power.”*** (Ethics Part 1)

The Conflation of the Spectrum within Interchangeability,

from God’s Wrath to Human Perceptions of Evil

Among the handful of successful ‘transliterators’ of Spinoza’s deeply complex and intricately wrought masterwork, “Ethica in Ordine Geometrica Demonstrata”, Antonio Negri in his, ‘Savage Anomaly’, appears to be among the handful of authors who see through the morass, and to drill down on and to emphasize and bring to light the twin aspects of potestas and potentia, [pouvoir, puissance, French]. In English there is only one translation for these two, therefore we must refer to this duality as the twin aspects of Power.

But more to the point remains the fact that even the great Negri misses Spinoza’s point and usage of the notion of the overriding presence and controlling force of power. He attempts to turn Spinoza into some sort of proto-Marxian materialist/political theorist. That aside, Tony presents a masterful interpretation in the ‘constitutive’ dual activities of ‘oscillation’ and ‘vacillation’ at the interstices or ‘edges’ of the places where; Substance, Attribute and Mode conjoin. The volume in these exchanges of energy at these intersecting regions can barely be described, let alone clearly understood. These ‘borders’ among this triumvirate and ‘condenser and distillatory’ of raw power display themselves most captivatingly in the deep space images from NASA, which we all have viewed and which appear as a congeries of the distillates wherein gravity, light and energy intermingle to ‘warp’ space.

In these never to be forgotten images lie the essence of what Spinoza depicted as the infinite and eternal, *‘Power of God’*. This potency-in-act is pointing directly to raw Power as the primal distinguishing force in all of nature.

This raw power displays itself within the contingent modalities in human existence most controversially, in a variety of aspects; the fury of typhoons on the surface of the oceans and tornadoes from the sky, the ‘problem of evil’, in its incomprehensible acts of bestiality and human terror, and at the same time in the micro- distillate form of the ‘natural right’ or power, which belong to every human individual and to every nation-state.

This brief in Spinoza’s words, on these topics, will focus on the display of all these elements, and the concatenation of power’s omnipresence and affect in the progress of life.

First, notice just how Spinoza’s quiet depiction appears to bely the omnipotence behind the prominence of ‘Power’ in these three propositions.

**Prop. XXXIV.** *God's power is identical with his essence.*

*Proof*— *From the sole necessity of the essence of God it follows that God is the cause of himself and of all things. Wherefore the* ***power*** *of God, by which he and all things are and act, is identical with his essence. Q.E.D.*

**Prop. XXXV.** *Whatsoever we conceive to be in the power of God, necessarily exists.*

*Proof*— *Whatsoever is in God's* ***power****, must be comprehended in his essence in such a manner, that it necessarily follows therefrom, and therefore necessarily exists*.

**Prop. XXXVI.** *There is no cause from whose nature some effect does not follow.*

*Proof— Whatsoever exists expresses God's nature or essence in a given conditioned manner; that is,* ***whatsoever exists, expresses in a given conditioned manner God's power, which is the cause of all things, therefore an effect must necessarily follow.*** (All, from “Ethics” Part 1- Concerning God)

Suffice for now, it to be the case, that Spinoza, no matter how quietly he appears to do so, in the above propositions, places a substantial weight for all of god’s creation on the notion of ‘Power’.

**The Ramifications of God’s Raw ‘Power’**

In our eyes the existence of ‘evil’

Lest anyone becomes confused with all its talk of Blessedness and God and of how only Love can overcome Hate and of Piety and of Love for Your Neighbor, lest anyone becomes confused that is, please mark well that Spinoza’s understanding of the universe hinges on one thing and one thing only; Power, in its rawness and implacability.

These are my words to you;

Before anyone confuses the “Ethics” for some palliative or litany of kindness and joy, some sleepy dream world where all that we must do is to try hard, to try our best, in order to become a more understanding person; it behooves us all to be perfectly clear that when Spinoza speaks of God’s ‘Power’, he is speaking of every manifestation of power that is imaginable and of much which does not sit too well with our delicate sensibilities. Raw unrestrained power permeates everything, everywhere and all at once, even as it drives evolution forward; unrelenting, unstoppable, unavoidable, uncaring about so-called consequences, devoid of any emotion, potent beyond understanding.

This ‘Power’ is the driving force behind and in front of everything imaginable which might be a part of the total, infinite, and eternal; the creation and re-creation of all of nature.

It is this power which resides inside of you and each and every one of us, as humans. This power equally doles out supreme pleasure and unimaginable pain. The violence of rape and torture and stabbings and mass shootings and unjustified incarceration, of child molestation and domestic abuse; of every human injustice ever meted out now in present time, in our historical and pre-historic past and forever into the future. Burnings at the stake, crucifixions, stoning in the streets, roadside bombs which mutilate and amputate, misanthropy, xenophobia, insane midnight lynching- masking cowardice in hood and cloak. Provoking the in-humane torching of your neighbor’s hut, mass starvations, the unjust imprisonment of political prisoners, of pogroms, genocide; the extinction of dinosaurs and the hunting to extinction of many other species.

This is an outcome of Spinoza’s ‘conatus sese conservendi’, the burning appetite to survive. It is organically built into and encapsulates the ‘essence’ of everyone and everything in all the ‘creata’, it is the visible, risible micro-demonstration of God’s Omnipotence, of universal ‘Power’.

It gives form to every deprivation, every degradation, every humiliation; virtually everything which fuels the fear that haunts human imagination.

It gives fiery birth to stars, constellations, galaxies; black holes, dark matter, gravitational waves, solar flares; those million miles per hour blasts of energy from inside the sun, which if unleashed would devour this earth in a nano-second. Fire, smoke, volcanic ash, cyclones, tornados, hurricanes, monstrous dust storms which cross the Atlantic from the Sahara and fuel the runoff land of the Amazon with fresh topsoil. And yes, of course the impending frightful aura of the dreaded, ‘climate change’!

This is power, and yes, we should fear it and never ignore its presence and nearness in our lives. It is cancer and TB and leprosy and MS and heart failure, wherein the ‘conatus’ becomes drained away from the body by a force stronger than itself. As Spinoza states it in the Axiom to Ethics Part 4;

*Axiom*

*“There is no individual thing in nature, than which there is not another more powerful and strong. Whatsoever thing be given, there is something stronger whereby it can be destroyed.”*

We cannot and will not ever control it or stop it.

It is the power of 3 billion years in the formation of this planet; from fire ash in the sky distributed among all the regions in the cosmos, until its formation into the molten rock whose immeasurably dense weight, whirled and crushed itself into its now familiar spherical shape. With fiery internal rivers of roiling lava and relentless grinding and smashing together in an ongoing inferno which protects earth’s fiery molten, nickel core.

And after all of this morphology was complete, this power, after these billions of years begat us; initially as two molecules one bluish, one greenish; one a crystal, one a gas, entwining themselves in an impossible embrace; exponentially multiplying and gaining auturgical complexity, somehow forging new life in crystalline bone and oxygen imbibing lungs, with delicate interconnected organs adjoining them to the skeletal frame; power. And millions of years thereafter, a being, forged in god’s image of power in the form of self-reflective consciousness has emerged and risen to be the acknowledged master, for better or worse in many eyes of this earth; and now we worry and wonder, ‘who are we and whence and why have we come?’ Perhaps the better question, who and what do we wish to become? More than we now know is in our hands!

Conatus Ubiquitous

In human form this self-same power of god takes form where our physiognomy, of ‘fire in the belly’ and quickly responsive nervous system and pumping heart, meets with our ‘natural right’ and the ‘dictate of reason’, that is, it meets in our ‘conatus’ that fierce constitutive driver of hunger, appetite and the will to understand and thus to survive.

It forged our path in pre-history, when no one ruled and each and every owned a natural and organic right to lay claim to anything and everything that would fuel our urge to persist in existence. The only limit during those days was wherever that personal power reached its limit.

A person’s only limit resided in the power contained within and how it became expressed. That is the individual’s mandate, no law, no order, just power and the means to convey it.

And thus, it is this Power which has confounded these commentators and caused them to throw up their collective hands. They have surrendered to their greatest fears in life and tossed the blame onto Spinoza, when his only ‘fault’ has been to accurately depict, define and to account for this inexorable and unescapable primal condition in all the universe and in human lives.

**The upshot**- Spinoza is not depicting some delicate little world where all of the ‘creata’ nestle together in god’s beneficent world. Where the holy chosen pilgrims gather to gain the blessedness of wisdom and attain to the ivory tower of eternal love and live out their days in splendid isolation, shielded from the mundane and the unblessed.

No, he is depicting with mind staggering accuracy the real world, where raw unbending power pummels its way throughout earthly evolution, wreaking havoc on lives unprepared to weather the storm of ‘Fortuna’s wrath. He wants us to feel what god’s power really means and to recognize that our potential for blessed relief from confusion and doubt lies only in the path towards ‘understanding’ how all of these seemingly endless trials and tribulations are not the inventions of some evil, maligned demon, who intentionally founders human hopes and condemns them in perfidy.

Baruch wants us to feel the majesty in the birth and constant evolution and recreation of an infinite and eternal exchange of power and elegance of which we are potentially major players and shapers of our own destinies.

Yes, the road to grasping all of this and gaining true ‘acquiescence of the spirit’ is nearly impossible to reach, but that path is there for us and he has painstakingly laid it out in every detail in his “Ethics”.

It has been said that *‘Many are called, but few are chosen!”* Baruch has made it possible to break that taboo. It is all up to you, awaken and gird yourself, your body and your mind. You are a child of god and have been afforded great gifts, use them.

**For the student**- The Tractatus On the Improvement of the Understanding will serve your needs as an outline of the entire “Ethics”. Spend all of the time necessary to completely grasp each and every word. And even more than an outline it is the only prosaic form of Baruch’s writing which needs little transliteration. And yet, unavoidably much of what he says in the TIE will be new to your mind.

In particular is his announcement of a new and little-known origin of the epistemological ontology of the active or adequate ‘idea’. In this little document, Spinoza coins it, the ‘true idea’.

Find something in your mind, that one thing which you can picture two ways, one as an idea in your mind, the other as on object or event in the real world. Here is an example.

My wife was in need of a medical intervention which involved a minor surgical procedure. This required that a phlebotomist attach a transfusion device to one of her veins in her arm or hand.

Because of the tiny almost imperceptible size of Diane’s veins this procedure always caused her not an inconsiderable amount of discomfort. Before the day of this procedure she requested that the hospital staffer who was the most skilled in this procedure be assigned to her.

A nurse entered the surgery preparation room wearing a shirt which bore the message, ‘I speak Veinglish’. She skillfully attached the needle to Di’s arm.

Before she left the room, she related to us that the reason for her skill in this procedure was because she did not really need to see the patients arm to know where the veins were located. She said that she could ‘see’ them and that with a corresponding ‘feel’ with her fingers she could identify and access the vein successfully.

What she had described to us was Spinoza’s ‘idea’ in action. She related to us, something she knew in two different ways but which is essentially and virtually identical. The veins and the picture in her minds-eye of those same veins. There you have it, now find a way to make this brilliance from Baruch’s mind, your own!

One important Caveat! It must be noted that virtually thousands of readers, among whom were dozens and more of Spinoza specialists, have read, and in some cases written about, and thoroughly discussed the TIE. And yet not one of them has gleaned from that any inkling of the magnificence of Spinoza’s discovery of the workings of the human mind which are couched in his ‘idea’. So, do beware!

**Substance**

-Consigning as incomprehensible, Baruch’s unique ‘self-caused’ universal immanence; through which he both asserts ‘Substance’ primacy and its immutable presence within all of ‘naturans, naturata’, and further, how Spinoza could adamantly deny the existence of an inert ‘matter’; both Descartes and science’s home turf.

Commentators contend that Spinoza’s assertion that the ‘essence’ of substance and that it is indivisible, cannot be reconciled with any contention, that it shares any point of convergence or interconnection with the infinite attributes, and that both substance and attribute, as infinite essences, cannot be reconciled with the existence of the finite modalities

**Explanation**- What, after all is ‘Substance’? Is it just some archaic holdover ‘catchall’ employed by musty old philosophers to cover for all of the sticking points in their elaborate metaphysical musings? Or does it serve some useful and vital role in our attempt to understand the source of this endless being which we call the universe?

It must be readily admitted, even according to Spinoza, who never admitted any terminology into his system without careful consideration, that substance is a strange designation. You cannot see it, you cannot sense anything about its physical presence, if it even has any. You cannot touch, smell, taste, or hear anything at all about it. And it can only be ‘known’ intuitionally.

To some it appears to be like an alchemical creation, a mysterious element meant to capture the imagination but which in the end delivers very little or no value.

Let us then quickly try to ascertain why Baruch, of all people the most careful and abstemious linguist, placed substance as the central figure in his entire metaphysical masterpiece. The only question is, why?

For this next assertion to make sense we will need to bear in mind a singular and almost always overlooked reality. The greatest minds in Western philosophy, and there are three, Aristotle, Spinoza and Kant, can all be said without fear of contradiction, to be so endowed with intelligence and wisdom about the reality of human life, that it can be stated that their minds remain years ahead of most of us, even today.

When Spinoza realized, after years of careful reflection and careful consideration, that the human mind’s capacity to reflect on the causes and origins of the universe, indicated that our function of thinking is not some random quirky happenstance due to strange machinations in natural selection. He recognized that the ‘intelligibility’ in the extended world, reflects a universal function which he termed, the ‘Attribute of Thought’ and that this attribute’s realm for exploration and eternal research resides in its twin and correlate, ‘Extended Substance’. Beyond that in identifying the mind’s capability within its innate and organic function of reason to produce ‘adequate understanding’, Spinoza at length came to an ‘intuitional’ grasp of this ‘thing’, of whose existence as necessary, is the only possible explanation for everything else in existence. He termed it ‘Substance’.

The question now becomes, what is ‘Substance’ and why did Baruch deem it necessary to frame it as the self-incepted cause of everything else?

But first; When we consider the ‘guiding lights’ of today’s academic philosophy scene, they exhibit some very strange opinions about past thinkers. The aforementioned triumvirate of Aristotle, Spinoza and Kant, without whom these ‘modern’ luminaries would have nothing on which to comment, find it quite within their reach to either criticize, in the pejorative sense, or to outright dismiss, the significance and relevance of these three minds, who, all three, could lay claim to a capacity to imagine, reflect upon, think clearly about and to draw intelligent conclusions on subject matter concerning the origins of the universe and the nature of all lifeforms, far beyond the compass of these contemporary ‘scribes’.

Spinoza pointed out that within the capacities of the human mind there are certain limitations. One of those is the restrictions on our ability to entertain some ideas which ‘cannot be framed as an idea in the mind, but which can be intuited.’

What he meant by this assertion is that if anyone of us attempts to frame in our minds-eye an image of the ‘big bang’, we can more or less ‘picture’ an unimaginably less than microscopic space, containing all of the energy which at some point exploded and evenly distributed itself into what eventually became over 200 billion constellations. Again, we can more or less ‘picture’ this.

But when it comes to Substance that which ‘caused’ this big bang and any and all other bangs of the same nature out of which grew and continue to grow, multiple universes, (if that is even acceptable to posit); of this we can form no image, or picture in our minds.

But this limitation, as Spinoza recognized absolutely clearly, does not keep us from obtaining to an adequately framed intuition of this being, which he termed ‘Substance.’

**Clarification-** What follows is excerpted from ‘To Discern Divinity’- A Discussion and Interpolation of Spinoza’s “Ethics” Part 1- Concerning God (download at- charlessaunders5.academia.edu)

Because of the integral role in which ‘substance’ serves at the core of Baruch’s metaphysics and the completely erroneously interpreted definitions that have been applied to it in almost the entire academic literature on Spinoza, we will expand on what has already been offered so that the reader might have a comprehensive overview of its true nature.

Here we will focus on Part One- Propositions 12-13-14-15 in order to seek clarification on this monism conundrum.

*Prop. 12- No attribute of substance can be conceived from which it would follow that substance can be divided.*

*Prop. 13- Substance absolutely infinite is indivisible.*

*Prop. 14- Besides God no substance can be granted or conceived.*

*Prop. 15- Whatever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be conceived*. [Pages 10-11]

Explanation- Prop. 12- Prop. 13- With all of this intense focus on substance and its attributes and modalities the time has come to answer the key question:

In what way is it possible for substance to contain an infinity of attributes and at the same time to remain undivided? And further if the modalities are finite how can they possibly be said to hold some element of the essence of substance?

For the answers we must turn to the genius of Padua and his mind-bending ‘Savage Anomaly”.

This contemporary philosopher has captured the heart of the dilemma perfectly and has eloquently laid out the relationship among ‘substance’, ‘attribute’ and ‘mode’ and precisely how they interconnect and interact. For this we are forever grateful.

Everything hinges, quite literally on the notion of ‘distillates’ of ‘God’s Power’. Consider the power of the universe to create and continuously re-create itself. And how the earth morphed from a molten ball of fire which disgorged the raw material for our moon in an explosion of incomprehensible size and eventually resolved itself into a placid sphere and home to 7 billion beings who cannot even detect the motion of its rotation, both on its axis or around the sun? This is a minor example of the power rampant in the ‘reciprocal exchange and interchange of energy fomenting throughout the universe.

‘Substance’ provides the ‘self-caused’ instigation for and the derivation of this power, and much more, most of which is beyond our ken.

It interconnects and interacts with both ‘attribute’ and ‘mode’ in a form of **reciprocal,** ‘vacillation and oscillation of power’.

If we think in terms of sound waves or even better yet of the waves of energy produced by the solar flares at the surface of the sun, the millions of miles per hour winds, formed as collateral from internal solar disruptions, projecting out as bands of waves in an even distribution which permeates through the cores of all of the planets in the solar system.

Some of the material from these explosions, traveling at incomprehensible speeds, penetrates and passes through every object in its path.

Meanwhile from this same solar flare, at the atomic/molecular level, other materials deposit themselves and bond atomically with the residual elements present in the atmosphere and in the planets’ crusts.

And yet any sensation for us from the bulk of the force from the sun storm passes harmlessly through the atmosphere and our bodies, virtually undetectably. (not unlike the presence of substance if it were capable of description and were in fact assignable a presence).

So too does ‘substance’, through the interaction of an undetectable yet intuitively conceivable vacillation, imbue its essence into; first the ‘attributes’, which gather its near complete ‘essence’ to form an infinity of discrete and infinite attributes, like the two we experience: thought and extension.

It then essentially creates, through the action of modification, the contingent material elements which form the objects in our world, including us. (Think of modification as similar to the process of iron ingots bubbling in the Bessemer furnace, emerging as distillates, interwoven through the dynamic process of atomic bonding).

The difference between the storms on the sun (which have a limited duration) and the reciprocal vacillation among, ‘substance’, ‘attribute’ and ‘mode’, is that their relationship and interactivity forms a never ending and infinite regenerative cycle, moving back and forth, as it were; changing in its form and function within ‘attribute’ and ‘mode’, but never altering or affecting the nature of ‘substance’.

All of this must be borne in mind while remembering that as the ‘Cause of Itself’ Substance is not amenable to any change or alteration in form. Sound paradoxical? In reality it is not.

Now each of us must adapt all of the above description into language amenable to each reader’s method of reflection and contemplation so that it may be readily absorbed and most importantly, internalized.

Please bear in mind that this demonstration is only an analogy or perhaps, better yet an approximation of the effect of substance on the attributes and modalities. It certainly is not intended to serve as a Spinozistic definition of ‘substance’.

**The upshot**- Substance, in the minds of most contemporary thinkers has been reduced to a non-entity and placed away on an antiquities shelf. They appear to take great comfort in this dismissal.

For the balance of us who realize that metaphysical certainty is both very much alive and well and a distinct possibility to attain to Spinoza’s Explanation of substance;

**III.** *“By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.”* (Ethics Part 1- Def. III)

When Baruch speaks of ‘*conceived through itself’*, what he means, as an example is the same as the word, ‘universe’. Notice, we do not need any explanation following this concept. It stands all inclusive in its own right.

Spinoza’s hallmark achievement consists in his startling recognition that the human mind’s capacity to grasp the presence of an infinite and eternal cosmos and all of the complexity involved in such a structure, that the mind is a by-product of a universal intelligence (Attribute of Thought) and an endless creation and re-creation (Attribute of Extension) which can, in its endless and beginingless eternity, be attributed to one self-caused entity; he termed it ‘Substance’.

**For the student**- The best way to approach an attempt to understand Spinoza’s ‘Substance’ will be to effectively put aside any and all preconceptions of in what the universe consists. Forget about; space, time, matter, each of these concepts does have its place, but in order to position your mind to entertain the ‘first principle’ of metaphysical proportions, you will need to be completely open to something new and heretofore unknown.

As you attempt to ponder this admittedly vast amount of information on ‘Substance’ allow your mind to do the heavy lifting for you.

Once you have completed this section, take some time to research the Spinoza scholars previously mentioned; Hallett, Harris, McKeon and others from the recommended reading list in any of this author’s Pamphlets, and let time and the innate power of your own understanding assist you to begin to form a usable comprehension of this significant cornerstone in Baruch’s ‘Clear Labyrinth’. If you are willing to try, you may find that this challenge is much easier than it at first appears.

**Endgame for the Missteps**

And so, dear Reader, there they are; all of the missteps, misunderstandings, misquotes, misapprehensions, misnomers and outright mistakes which have been and continue to be made in academic Spinozan commentary. Yes, these unintended errors do indeed muddy the waters and cloud the view to Baruch’s masterful edifice; so carefully constructed so unified in thought and logical constancy.

Thus, our final thought to you must come in the form of a question, what then can be done, by anyone seeking accurate interpretation of Benedictus’ masterpiece of understanding on humans’ place in god’s universe?

Simply, trust yourself. Become your own arbiter of ‘certainty’ in his writings. Trust your own intelligence and capability to comprehend the truth. With patience and over time, allow Spinoza’s guidance and tutelage to lead you to that understanding which affords anyone who expends the effort to grasp the significance of the reality, that,

*… “knowledge and love of god, the eternal and infinite substance, [which] transforms all human emotion and actions, and constitutes the life of blessedness, which is the highest virtue, the final object of rational desire, as well as the completest and most adequate knowledge of nature. This is human immortality, and its special character follows from the nature of self-consciousness, which, as was said above, is no inert replica of the extended world but is an active self-awareness of the body, that embraces in its purview and comprehension all its relations to other bodies and the infinite, eternal character of the essence of substance to which it belongs, because it-* ***“proceeds from an adequate idea of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things.”*** (Ethics, II, xl, S 2)

Errol E Harris, “Salvation from Despair”, The Final Problem, p 241

**Plus, One More;**

**Spinoza’s Revolutionary Epistemology**

**The True Idea**

Any author or commentator on Spinoza who accuses him of dogmatism or of lacking epistemological clarity in his presentation of the origin and nature of human knowledge has only their own shortsightedness and lack of reading comprehension to blame. These two sections below make abundantly clear precisely what Baruch intends in his employment of the term ‘idea’.

The idea comprises the core or kernel element in the whole of Spinoza’s philosophy.

Why then it has been systematically ignored or overlooked by nearly the full complement of Spinoza ‘Scholars’ is beyond comprehension. Yes, it is completely unique. No, no one else in the history of philosophy has ever grasped the true nature of knowledge in the manner that Baruch did.

But only complete blind prejudice and adherence to the descartian misapprehension and assignment of knowledge into an incomprehensible and unjustifiable duality, which consigns any hope or possibility of human certainty into an irrecoverable morass, could possibly miss the import, significance and revolutionary meaning in the following two notes from Ethics Part 2, prop. XLIX and XLIII respectively.

[One hint- When Spinoza speaks of certainty and of the identity of the mind with the object, what that means is that there is essentially and virtually no distance between the mind and the object that it is ‘considering’. As human beings, we do not experience this directly, but the mind does.

Hence, Baruch’s declaration that he wishes for us to comprehend, *‘…the nature of the union existing between the mind and the whole of nature.’* TIE P. 6

Oh yes, and one emphatic reminder; the ‘idea’ (thought in the mind), is not an hypothesis, nor an assertion, nor a judgement; it is not even made of words in any way whatsoever. Now ask yourself, what remains, that it could be?!

As Kierkegaard would demand of us, if he were still with us; we must not be afraid of this union, it marks our true freedom!

No one can teach you this. You must grapple with it yourself. Its explication is not hidden from sight. It is all contained within the TIE, the TTP and the “Ethics”.]

“Ethics” Part 2, Notes to prop. XLIX and XLIII

XLIX, Note-Paragraph 3

*“I begin, then, with the first point, and warn my readers to* ***make an accurate distinction between an idea, or conception of the mind, and the images of things which we imagine. It is further necessary that they should distinguish between idea and words, whereby we signify things. These three—namely, images, words, and ideas—are by many persons either entirely confused together, or not distinguished with sufficient accuracy or care****, and hence people are generally in ignorance, how absolutely necessary is a knowledge of this doctrine of the will, both for philosophic purposes and for the wise ordering of life.* ***Those who think that ideas consist in images which are formed in us by contact with external bodies, persuade themselves that the ideas of those things, whereof we can form no mental picture, are not ideas, but only figments, which we invent by the free decree of our will ; they thus regard ideas as though they were inanimate pictures on a panel, and, filled with this misconception, do not see that an idea, inasmuch as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or negation.*** *Again, those who confuse words with ideas, or with the affirmation which an idea involves, think that they can wish something contrary to what they feel, affirm, or deny. This misconception will easily be laid aside by one, who reflects on the nature of knowledge, and seeing that it in no wise involves the conception of extension, will therefore clearly understand,* ***that an idea (being a mode of thinking) does not consist in the image of anything, nor in words.*** *The essence of words and images is put together by bodily motions, which in no wise involve the conception of thought.”*

And finally;

Proposition XLIII

*Proof****.—"A true idea in us is an idea which is adequate in God, in so far as he is displayed through the nature of the human mind*** *(*[*II. xi. Coroll.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_11c)*). Let us suppose that there is in God, in so far as he is displayed through the human mind, an adequate idea, A. The idea of this idea must also necessarily be in God, and be referred to him in the same way as the idea A (by* [*II. xx.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_20)*, whereof the proof is of universal application). But the idea A is supposed to be referred to God, in so far as he is displayed through the human mind ; therefore, the idea of the idea A must be referred to God in the same manner ; that is (by* [*II. xi. Coroll.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_11c)*), the adequate idea of the idea A will be in the mind, which has the adequate idea A ; therefore he, who has an adequate idea or knows a thing truly (*[*II. xxxiv.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_34)*), must at the same time have an adequate idea or true knowledge of his knowledge ; that is, obviously, he must be assured.” Q.E.D.*

*Note.—"I explained in the note to* [*II. xxi.*](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_%28Spinoza%29/Part_2#prop_21) *what is meant by the idea of an idea ; but we may remark that the foregoing proposition is in itself sufficiently plain****. No one, who has a true idea, is ignorant that a true idea involves the highest certainty. For to have a true idea is only another expression for knowing a thing perfectly, or as well as possible****.* ***No one, indeed, can doubt of this, unless he thinks that an idea is something lifeless, like a picture on a panel, and not a mode of thinking—namely, the very act of understanding.*** *And who, I ask, can know that he understands anything, unless he do first understand it? In other words, who can know that he is sure of a thing, unless he be first sure of that thing? Further, what can there be more clear, and more certain, than a true idea as a standard of truth? Even as light displays both itself and darkness, so is truth a standard both of itself and of falsity.”*

A Reverie

There is an absolutely acceptable reason that the nature and existence of Spinoza’s ‘true idea’ has not yet come to light.

This reason is steeped in ‘Fear’.

The unimaginably dynamic potency within the mind’s mimetic functionality

Is literally too frightening to speak of

The human mind and memory, in concert, serves as the most capable audio cum videographic

recording device ever conceived or imagined.

But it does not record or imagine; it captures reality, in all its brutal inescapable truth.

The most horrifying aspect of any and all mental affliction

Are the images and voices from the past, but it is not the past

It is the present, it is now, it will not be ignored

It won’t go away.

And you cannot explain it to the family or the nurse or your shrink or yourself.

The voices heard seem real, because they are real

All our ideas are real and totally equivalent to our experience

To which they are a matching pair

Thought and Extension

Experienced as one ‘whole’

Within the human body and mind.

The philosopher stumbles around looking for an analogy, or a metaphor

But there is none

Reality is stored in our minds, it is captured faithfully, every day

It remains as it was when we lived it

Timeless, potent, impossibly real.

It can either haunt, cure or kill us

But it must be reckoned with.

Spinoza’s idea contains virtually and actually everything just said above this line.

No one has as yet explained this to anyone else

That is, unless this little ramble

Just did!

**The Illusion of Free Will**

**A Thought Experiment**

For those reading this who espouse the existence of ‘free will’, either in your writing or in your private thoughts here is an experiment which you can attempt within the unassailable environs of your own mind.

Next time that you find yourself lying awake in the night, unable to fall asleep due to the ‘racing reveries’ of a stress filled work-scape or some other troubling thought-scape, try this, tell yourself that you can immediately and actively rid your mind of these perturbances strictly through an act of conscious volition.

Poof! So much for your free will.

As an alternative, has it ever occurred to you that at any and every given point in time during your waking day, that you have no idea whatsoever what thoughts will enter your mind next nor do you have any idea or control over the mood swings that accompany these disturbing interruptions?

Once you share a moment of complete honesty with yourself, come back to the “Ethics” Part 2. Re-read Propositions XLVIII and XLIII with the accompanying notes and begin again.

**Summary**

If it made little difference and nothing was at stake, then this piece need never have been written. Take this as an apology, or at least as an admission that this is not a proud moment. To expose the mistakes of others came as a heavily weighted warning from Baruch. He realized that by demeaning people’s work all that is typically accomplished is that whatever the intention behind the act, the only thing that ever gains attention is the negativity.

But in this case, there is no other choice or recourse. The positive part in all of this is that Spinoza’s system is enjoying a rebirth. As mentioned, there are dozens upon dozens of books and papers circulating everywhere and the mainstream acceptance of Spinoza continues to grow. From some little known and barely remarked 17th century anomaly, he has taken on a new stature as an acknowledged precursor to the age of ‘modern’ philosophy.

But one insurmountable obstacle stands like an iron fortress before all of this celebratory adulation; the commentary, in most cases is woefully inadequate if not entirely incorrect.

Again, if nothing were at stake this could be let go, to run its course and for the truth to, eventually, hopefully, emerge. But the mistakes are too egregious and misrepresentational. Baruch splendid ‘Clear Labyrinth’, has been twisted into some type of Rationalist, Neo-materialist, Proto-determinist hodge-podge.

Baruch Spinoza’s philosophy is not a theory. It is a carefully thought through and completely accurate depiction of every aspect in the life of humanity. What is being papered over is your story and your potential future. Spinoza would want no part of any interpretation of life which presented humans as causally determined robots, or of divinity’s power and splendid creation as some sort of reductionist idealism. He saw us for who we are; spiritual creatures, imbued with ‘conative’ vibrance and formed by an infinite and eternal process of which we are an integral part.

Yes, we were once animals, little tiny crawling, swimming amphibians. And yes, then we morphed into apelike tree dwellers, who clambered from leafy branch to the next in search of nourishment and safety.

But once we stepped down onto those plains something monumental began to grow within us. A capability like no other on this planet

And now, here we stand on the brink of coming to grips with a new awareness of our ownership of a ‘mind’ Much more than a brain, that electro-mechanical-biological storage unit and systems maintainer.

A mind, which innately and organically unites us at the nexus where extended reality and spirit conjoin.

This is our present and future, our birthright, and no amount of apologizing needs to be offered for insisting that the correctives detailed in this paper are necessary, accurate and entirely in line!

It will take some time for all of this to ‘sink’ in. But some day it will; the sooner the better, for all of us.

And one more thing before we part company, amidst all of the whinging and complaining in this paper there is some serious content. What has been presented is one method but one only, of the numberless possibilities within the new rubric termed, ‘Doing Philosophy’.

So please do not think for a moment that teasing out the philosopher/author’s ‘intended meaning’, must result in some one-dimensional type of exposition. The possibilities are endless, that is at least as far as human imagination can travel!